

Sifted Like Wheat, Restored to Feed Sheep
Luke 22:31-34, 54-62, John 21:15-19
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Read Luke 22:31-34, 54-62, John 21:15-19

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” (2 Timothy 3:16)

Introduction

The first three hundred years of the Christian church saw opposition and persecution from the Roman Empire. It was not constant, but it was enough that Christians had to be ready to give their lives for their faith in Jesus or betray Him with their words and actions. In AD 249, Trajan Decius became the emperor of Rome and set about bringing glory back to the nation. He believed that the Roman gods were not blessing the land because there were too many people who did not worship them sufficiently, so Decius decided that all citizens of Rome needed to offer a sacrifice to the Roman gods and to himself, the emperor. This would not be a private sacrifice, but a public one made in front of a Roman magistrate. The punishment for refusal ranged from the government taking your property to beatings/torture to imprisonment and even execution. The Christian church had grown to a notable size by that point and every believer had to make a choice whether to violate the 1st commandment and offer worship to false gods, or to pay the price for refusing. Many refused to participate and were imprisoned, beaten, or stoned.

Yet many Christians decided that denying their faith was better than being tortured or killed over it, so they went and made the sacrifice. They became known in the church as “the Lapsed,” and were excommunicated and treated as apostates by church leadership. After Decius was killed in battle and the forced offerings were ended, many of those who had faltered and given in wanted to come back to the church. But church leaders were split on how to treat these believers who had denied the faith. Some leaders, led by a priest named Novatian, said that they could never come back to the church or be saved because of their cowardice and fall in the face of persecution; they had forfeited the right to grace. Others, led by Cyprian and Cornelius, argued that God would forgive them of those sins and that the church should as well. Cyprian wrote that if they repented and renewed their faith, they would again “deserve from the Lord not only pardon, but a crown.”¹

This morning, we look at the original “lapsed” follower of Jesus. A man who denied his Master and Savior at a critical time of persecution. We’ll see that his denial came after he adamantly stated that he would never forsake his Lord, that of all disciples, Jesus could count on him. But in moments of weakness, he faltered and fell. Is there redemption for someone like that? And what hope do we modern-day Christians have, knowing that we are not perfect followers who lose our nerve and fail often?

Our first set of verses shows us the

I. Denial of the Denial (Luke 22:31-34)

³¹ “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, ³² but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your

¹ <https://baptistnews.com/article/the-lapsed-an-ancient-church-controversy-with-2020-implications/> and <https://www.gci.org/articles/persecution-penance-and-the-lapsed/>

brothers.”³³ Peter said to him, “Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death.”³⁴ Jesus said, “I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me.”

(KEEP?) As we look at the actions of Peter, it’s good be reminded of who he was. Kent Hughes has remarked that, “No disciple spoke as often as Peter. And of necessity our Lord addressed him more than any other of his followers. No disciple was reproved by Jesus as much or as strongly as Peter was, and he was the only disciple who thought it his duty to reprove Jesus! No disciple ever so boldly confessed and encouraged Christ – and none ever bothered our Lord more than Peter.”² He was always listed first when the apostles were named. He was a man whose greatest strength, his boldness, was also his strongest weakness.

What’s really interesting in these verses is that in the Greek, the first two times that Jesus says “you” in verse 31, it’s plural, but in verse 32, it’s singular.³ So we should read these verses as: “*Satan demanded to have all of you disciples, that he might sift you all (ya’ll) like wheat, but I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail.*” In English, it sounds like Satan just wanted to take down Peter, but understanding the plural of the Greek, we see that he wanted to attack all of the disciples. He knew that they would be the ones to carry on Jesus’ ministry after His death, so why not attack them then and cripple the church before it even began? Apparently, he was granted limited access. We read last week that “*Satan entered into Judas*” to influence him to betray Jesus to the religious leaders. And now he’ll have a chance to test Peter.

Satan requesting permission from God to go after a godly person - what does this remind you of? It reminds me of the beginning of the book of Job where Satan appeared before God to request permission to test Job’s faithfulness. Job 1:8-12:

“And the Lord said to Satan, ‘Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil? Then Satan answered the Lord and said, ‘Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.’ And the Lord said to Satan, ‘Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand.’”

So Satan wrecked havoc on Job’s life, having his children killed and all his property destroyed. Job didn’t curse God, he passed that first test. So Satan went back to God in chapter 2 and asked to attack Job personally, afflict his body, because surely that would make him turn against God. The main point is that God’s people are not attacked and tested by Satan without God’s permission. (Really nothing happens without God allowing and ordaining it to happen.) On the one hand, that might anger us: hey, why does God allow Satan to do this? On the other hand, it should be the ultimate comfort that God knows exactly how much we will be tested; that anything Satan throws at us has been allowed and tempered by God’s restraining hand.

Jesus said that Satan wanted to sift Peter like wheat – think of a farmer going through the grain that he has harvested so that the true wheat is separated from the chaff that is no good to him. This is a testing of whether Peter is a true follower or not; what is he made of? This is a reminder that all of us will have our faith tested at some point, some will fall away because they were not truly saved, others will pass the test because they are genuine and strong. And then others, like Peter, will falter but persevere. What a joy to know that in the midst of that, Jesus prays for us, as He told Peter in

² R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), p. 781.

³ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke, Vol. 2* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), p. 486.

verse 32. This very moment, He is in heaven praying for His people. Romans 8:34 says that Jesus “*is at the right hand of God... interceding for us*” and Hebrews 7:25 says that “*He always lives to make intercession for them.*” Now, He didn’t pray that Peter would be completely left alone by Satan – if He had wanted that, then He could have just denied Satan the ability to sift Peter in the first place. He also didn’t pray that Peter would never sin, but that he would persevere, that his faith would hold up so that he could get through this trial and be able to strengthen his fellow believers on the other side of it. He prayed for Peter knowing he would fail.

There are many Biblical characters to whom the motto “pride goeth before a fall” applies. Goliath told David that he would feed his flesh to the birds and beasts right before David knocked him out cold with a stone and cut off his head. We’re going to study the book of Esther in the fall, and we’ll meet a man named Haman, an advisor to the king, who was driven by pride until it all backfired on him. In Daniel chapter 4, Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, was in the middle of praising himself and his accomplishments when God said, “You’re done,” and turned him into a beast who was driven out into the wild where he fed on grass. Peter’s pride announced that he would follow Jesus to prison and death. And he meant it. But Jesus knew better, Peter would falter. We should learn from this and realize that we are not as strong as we think we are. We are vulnerable to the lure of the world, the flesh, and the devil. We should flee sin and not assume we can defeat it. We don’t necessarily need to walk around trembling that we’ll be falling into terrible sin at the drop of a hat; but a little humility will go a long way in helping us live lives of obedience and faith. One of my favorite lines in a hymn is from “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing”: “prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love; here’s my heart, oh take and seal it, seal it for Thy courts above.” I don’t want to boast that I’ll never forsake God because I know I can be double-minded and weak; I want to humbly ask God to help me persevere.

We see later in the chapter how the actual event of Peter’s failure happened:

II. Three Times He Denied (Luke 22:54-62)

⁵⁴ Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest’s house, and Peter was following at a distance. ⁵⁵ And when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat down among them. ⁵⁶ Then a servant girl, seeing him as he sat in the light and looking closely at him, said, “This man also was with him.” ⁵⁷ But he denied it, saying, “Woman, I do not know him.” ⁵⁸ And a little later someone else saw him and said, “You also are one of them.” But Peter said, “Man, I am not.” ⁵⁹ And after an interval of about an hour still another insisted, saying, “Certainly this man also was with him, for he too is a Galilean.” ⁶⁰ But Peter said, “Man, I do not know what you are talking about.” And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. ⁶¹ And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, “Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times.” ⁶² And he went out and wept bitterly.

To be fair to Peter, all of the disciples except he and John had fled after Jesus’ arrest. They were the only ones with the courage to find out what was happening with Jesus, with Peter at the high priest’s house and John at the scene of the cross. So far, Peter was backing up his boast that he would follow Jesus to prison and to death. But it’s there in the courtyard around the fire that he was recognized. When you’ve got as big a mouth as Peter did, you should accept the fact that people will remember you, right? And when you’ve cut off the ear of the high priest’s servant, maybe you should realize that someone will identify you. And that is where Peter’s courage failed him. Three people in this small crowd around the fire recognized him in the space of an hour and brought up the fact that he was one of Jesus’ companions. Every time Peter denied the person’s accusation, trying to get the attention off of himself. I can only imagine that this was motivated by fear of being arrested as well. Peter did not deliberately turn on Jesus like Judas did; he was planning to follow

Jesus to the end, but everything got intense, and he couldn't handle the pressure. Judas was wicked, Peter was weak. There is some irony there, because think back to Jesus' biggest encouragement of Peter – when Peter confessed that Jesus was “*the Christ, the Son of the living God*” and Jesus said, “*Blessed are you... on this rock I will build my church*” (Matthew 16:16-18). Peter was commended for his knowing exactly who Jesus was, but here he was pretending that he didn't know Jesus at all. The name Peter means “rock,” but he crumbled in the face of scrutiny.

Luke tells us that after the rooster crowed, Jesus turned and looked right at him. Mel Gibson's *Passion* movie captured that scene so well. I'm not sure what all that look communicated. If it had been me, I would have been thinking, “I'm in chains and about to get whipped and then hung on a cross, and you can't even bear to admit that you know me?” But Jesus was probably not angry or wanting to induce guilt, He just heard the rooster at the same time that Peter did and locked eyes with him as a reminder of what He had predicted. Peter was stricken with guilt and remembered their whole earlier conversation, so he went outside and broke down in tears. The Greek word in verse 62 translated “wept bitterly” (*eklausen*) is the word used for grieving the dead; that's intense weeping.⁴ I'm sure that Peter was haunted with that look for weeks to come; hopefully, he also remembered Jesus' words that he would turn again and then strengthen his brothers.

And this is where Peter's story diverts from Judas'. Both felt awful and guilty after failing Jesus; they were filled with remorse, but one let it drive him to despair and one of them let it drive him back to His Savior. One took his own life and the other held on, knowing there was new life and redemption beyond failure. Peter rejoined the band of apostles and was around for Jesus' resurrection, inspecting the empty tomb himself. He was there when Jesus showed His resurrected body to them in the Upper Room. We turn to the end of John's Gospel where

III. Three Times He Was Restored (John 21:15-19)

¹⁵ *When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs.”* ¹⁶ *He said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.”* ¹⁷ *He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.* ¹⁸ *Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.”* ¹⁹ *(This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.”*

Remember the setting of this passage: the disciples had gone fishing sometime after Jesus' resurrection. Jesus had already appeared to them in person, but now he appeared on the shore and when Peter recognized Him, he jumped out of the boat to go see him. Jesus had cooked His disciples breakfast, so they sat and ate. Then Jesus pulled Peter aside to have a private talk. It took place next to a fire, just as his denials had come next to the fire. It was a conversation that was meant to both encourage and challenge Peter; but more than that, it was time to restore Simon the Rock.

Jesus didn't bring up all the events that happened when Peter denied Him. He could have scolded him and said, “I told you that was going to happen.” But Jesus was more interested in the future. He asked Peter three times if he loved him. Why three times? Three denials required three affirmations. Peter didn't realize what was happening at the time; the text says he was just hurt by

⁴ Ryken, p. 531.

Jesus asking three times. There are several Greek words used for love. The first two times that Jesus asked Peter “do you love me?” He used the word *agape* – the strongest, godly unconditional love that perseveres. But Peter didn’t answer with that word, he answered the first two times with, “Yes, Lord, you know that I *phileo* you.” *Phileo* is a brotherly, affectionate love, but it’s nowhere near as intense as *agape*. So the third time, Jesus apparently decided to accept Peter’s word, and said, “Do you *phileo* me?”⁵ Some commentators say that doesn’t mean anything, and that’s possibly true. But I think what’s happening here is that Peter had learned his lesson not to brag about his commitment. So he chose a more humble word to describe his love, and that’s enough for Jesus.

What did Jesus mean by “*tend my sheep*” and “*feed my sheep*”? I thought that Peter was a fisherman not a shepherd. I think this goes back to the earlier verse 32: “*And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.*” And it looks ahead to the time when Peter would be a church leader and pastor, shepherding the flock of God. He had dual roles: he was still a fisherman, fishing for men, but he was also a shepherd. I Peter 5:1-9 (turn there in your Bibles) shows how much Peter learned and grew in the next thirty years when he wrote his letters to the church:

¹ So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. ⁵ Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” ⁶ Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, ⁷ casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. ⁸ Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.

Not only did Peter internalize Jesus’ command to feed His sheep, but in verse 2 he instructed all church leaders who would ever read his letter in the history of the church to “*shepherd the flock of God... willingly, as God would have you*”. Then he went on to tell the leaders to be humble and to resist the devil. All things that he had learned the hard way from firsthand experience! The church is full of sheep and Jesus is the Good Shepherd, but He entrusts His flock to under-shepherds – pastors, elders, church leaders – who guard and feed the flock. May all of us in church leadership remember that if we love Jesus and take up His ministry, we need to feed and tend His sheep.

In verses 18-19, Jesus alluded to the fact that Peter’s ministry would eventually result in his being martyred for his faith. Peter will eventually fulfill his pledge to Jesus to follow Him to prison and to death. The book of Acts records Peter’s being arrested, then miraculously released from prison. But he would be arrested again, and church history records that Peter was crucified under Nero’s reign. But Peter requested that he be crucified upside down because he was not worthy to be killed in the same way that his Lord was killed. Again, he had learned humility in a big way, But he had also gone from someone who was intimidated by a servant girl’s question around a fire to someone who was unafraid to boldly proclaim Jesus in front of the whole city of Jerusalem. In Acts 2, he preached at the Pentecost gathering and 3,000 people were saved. Then he and John preached in Acts 4 and 5,000 people were saved. In Acts 5:28, the high priest said, “*We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.*’ But Peter and the apostles answered, ‘*We must obey God rather than men.*”

⁵ Gary P. Baumler, *John* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2005), p. 272.

Conclusion

Steve Camp was a Christian singer/songwriter popular in the 80s and 90s; he had a song called “For Every Time” that summed up Peter’s story here:

“Three times Peter swore, ‘I don't know Him,’ the one he said he'd follow to the grave.
A thousand bitter tears could not wash away the sin, in fear he wondered what would Jesus say.
Three times Jesus asked, ‘Do you love Me?’ Three times his heart cried ‘Lord, you know I do.’
Once for every time that he denied Him Jesus restored him to the hope that he knew.
How many times have I denied Him? One day faithful, the next I turn away.
It's hard to believe He still loves me when my sin haunts me every day...
For every time we've broken His heart, for every time we've fallen,
Every time we thought we'd gone beyond His grace,
Once for all He stood in our place, He died for every time.”

The Gospel tells us that we cannot earn God’s love on our own, Jesus died to make us worthy, fulfilling God’s will on our behalf and bearing the punishment for our sin. If we are followers of Jesus and are united in faith to Him, as we live the Christian life, we strive to please the Lord, but we fail so often. It can be so discouraging seeing the same sins time and time again. And we rarely feel like we an effective witness for Him, we might wonder how much more failure Jesus will tolerate from us. And the answer is that every time we fail He forgives and restores us. Our sin should drive us to tears and godly guilt, but that should result in repentance, forgiveness, and restoration, not despair.

The words of another song that we sing in worship: “Before the Throne of God Above”

“When Satan tempts me to despair and tells me of the guilt within,
Upward I look and see Him there who put an end to all my sin.
Because the sinless Savior died my sinful soul is counted free.
For God the just is satisfied to look on Him and pardon me.”

When you feel condemned by your own conscience or by the evil one, you don’t have to give in to guilt and despair. We think that when we’ve committed these recurring sins, that God can’t stand the sight of us. But when God looks on you, He sees the obedience and perfection of Jesus, and loves you thoroughly. He may need to sanctify you and shape you through trials and sufferings, but His love for you is never more or less because of what you’ve done. Jesus is our Advocate, the Holy Spirit is our helper, and God is our Father who loves us and will never disown us. Amen.

Benediction - 1 Peter 5:10-11 – “And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To Him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.”