

THE CRUCIAL HOURS¹

“Satan Has Asked to Sift All of You”

In the name of Jesus, the Guardian of our souls, dearly redeemed:

“Simon, Simon, pay attention: Satan has asked to have you all, so that he may sift you as wheat.³² But I prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have returned to me, strengthen your brothers.” (Luke 22:31f EHV²)

Blessed by many Lenten seasons, you may be so familiar with the readings that you can anticipate what the characters of Christ’s Passion will say. Their lines may appall you, but they don’t surprise you. So when Jesus says to Peter, ***“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat,”*** you can recall what Jesus says next. But if you’re hearing this story for the first time, what would you actually expect Jesus to say next? ***“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. But . . .”*** ***“But”*** what?

Before we talk about what we might have expected to hear next, let’s look more closely at what Jesus has said so far. See how the Holy Spirit uses repetition? ***“Simon, Simon”***—something serious is coming. It’s like when Jesus says, ***“Amen, Amen,”*** twenty-five times in John’s Gospel account. Something super serious is next. ***“Simon, Simon, pay attention....”***

“Satan has asked” – in a very disrespectful, demanding way. Strange how Satan asks God for permission to tempt, yet this isn’t the first time. Remember how Satan asks God for permission to assault Job? Satan wanted to prove Job’s faith was shallow, that he only believed as long as God blessed him, that Job’s faith would surely fall apart if he was afflicted. (Job 1:6-13; 2:1-6) Satan wants to discredit God.

“To sift you as wheat” is the worst. You might think of winnowing wheat as when ancient style farmers toss wheat into the air so the heavier kernels fall to the ground and the chaff blows away. Satan wants to do far worse than winnowing to Peter. ***Sifting*** shakes the grain in a sieve so violently that it separates the wheat from the chaff. Satan wanted to brutally shake Peter’s soul so his faith would break loose. If he could shake Peter’s soul savagely enough, maybe Peter would lose connection with Jesus. Successful or not, ***sifting*** would be painful and violent as Satan enjoys tormenting souls.

So if you’re hearing this for the first time, you might expect Jesus to say, ***“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to have you all, so that he may sift you like wheat. But, of course, I’m not going to let him! I’ll make this evening easy and protect you from severe trials. Satan won’t get anywhere near you!”*** Only Jesus doesn’t say that. Nor does he do that. Later that night in the courtyard of the high priest, Jesus allowed Satan to shake Peter violently, ***like wheat*** in a sieve.

Maybe you’d think Jesus at least would say, ***“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to have you all, so that he may sift you like wheat. And I’m going to let him—but only because you’ll pass with flying colors! I’ll let him try to sift you, so you can give him a whuppin’! Go get him, Peter!”***

That didn’t happen either. Peter ended up running out of the courtyard into the darkness, shaking violently, weeping bitterly. Satan had shaken from him not one, not two, but three separate denials of his Lord and Master. The same Lord and Master Peter had proudly proclaimed he’d never

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² EHV ~ *Evangelical Heritage Version* (<http://wartburgproject.org>) © 2019. NPH: 800-662-6022, Amazon-Kindle, LOGOS.

leave, never deny! Peter had been so certain, so confident in himself. Maybe the other disciples had a weak bond to be shaken loose from Jesus, but Peter knew he was too strong to fall into such sin.

Are you dying to ask the question: Why did Jesus allow Peter to go through this? Was Jesus just messing with the devil? Like Lucy van Pelt with Charlie Brown? The devil says, “You’re really going to let me kick the football this time? You’re really going to let me attack and steal this soul? Okay, let me get a running start.” Then at the last second Jesus grabs the soul away from Satan?

Believe or not, God had a far greater plan for Peter beyond defeating the devil. God would allow Peter to be shaken violently in the darkness that night but also to fail. Why? Peter needed to be humbled by failure – because of his strong faith. Yes, Peter had strong faith. Unfortunately, Peter’s strong faith was in himself. He trusted in his own strength, his own faith. Peter needed to learn to stop trusting in his own strength and instead trust in Jesus for strength against Satan. *“With might of ours can naught be done, soon were our loss effected; but for us fights the valiant one whom God himself elected.”* (CWH 863:2)

Maybe you have felt like Peter seeing others fall. Some celebrity doing something you’d never do – but maybe enjoy watching! A fellow Christian struggling as you shake your head not with sadness but with pride, “I guess there are some Christians so weak to do such things. But not I!”

Maybe Satan shook you violently—effortlessly?—so you committed a sin that was so great, so foul, so selfish, so harmful to others, so *evil* that you were shocked by it. Were you appalled that you could be shaken so violently, so effectively by Satan?

Why would God allow the devil to do that to you? Or Peter? Because now, weeping bitterly in the darkness outside the courtyard, you are much closer to knowing yourself as you truly are—a sinner helpless to defeat the devil by your own strength. You and I are defenseless against the one the Bible says ***“prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith.”*** (1 Peter 5:8f NIV84) Don’t despair; don’t be hopeless. Peter was not Satan’s primary target that night. The devil really wanted to sift Jesus like wheat and destroy our Savior by separating Jesus from unity with His Father, to separate Jesus even for a moment from obedience to God’s commands.

Satan ***sifting*** Peter with a servant girl and a few bystanders was nothing compared to ***sifting*** Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane that night. Jesus was shaken so violently that His sweat was like great drops of blood. How easy it would have been to just let go of the cup His Father gave Him to drink.

While Peter failed three times, Jesus did not fail even once. When Satan attempts to sift you, to shake your faith by telling you that your sins guarantee your going to hell, you can say with unshakeable certainty that your sins are forgiven through Christ and your faith is firmly—and only—in Him.

Find strength in the hope Jesus held out to Peter: ***“When you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”*** The Holy Spirit’s original Greek word for ***strengthen*** (στηρίζω) is the same as when Jesus firmly set His face toward Jerusalem and resolutely set out on His journey to the cross. (Luke 9:51) Christ’s determined strength empowered Peter for the family of God in the early New Testament Church. There’s such a sanctified humility in Peter from Acts 10 into chapter 11, speaking up for his gentile brothers and sister. Such humility in the epistles, First and Second Peter—humility as a ***sifted*** saint.

We too return to Jesus in repentance by the power of forgiveness from when He defeated Satan for us. Newfound humility in weakness actually strengthens us for our brothers and sisters in Christ to encourage them and point others to the Savior of all. Satan may ask God to sift you as wheat, but since he has to ask for permission, Satan’s power is limited; he clearly can’t do whatever he wants. God may grant permission, but if he does, God will use it to separate you from something harmful to your soul. God will graciously accomplish the opposite of ***sifting***. Instead of the separation Satan desires, God will actually bring you closer to His loving care and tender mercy. God will bind you more tightly than ever to Jesus. With the Psalmist we learn to say, ***“It was good for me that I was afflicted.”*** (Psalm 119:71 EHV) Amen.