

# The Sifting of Simon

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

Written By: Pastor John T. Anderson

Delivered On: March 26, 2011

*This Sermon is available in audio format for listening or downloading on our [Audio Sermons web page](#).*

The Lord loved His disciples so much! The hour of trial was fast approaching, just hours away, and He desperately wanted them to succeed and not fail. For several years now they had walked with Him and had the immeasurable blessing of personally seeing Him at work; seeing God live in human flesh. They had witnessed His untiring hand stretched forth in mercy to heal and bless. They had watched as He had raised the dead. They had heard His lips speak words of encouragement and consolation. They had listened to His fervent prayers ascending to His Father in heaven.

Never once in this period of time had they seen Him lose His temper, be discourteous or selfish. His whole life had been jam-packed with deeds of goodness, acts of kindness. Not one thread of self-seeking was seen in the fabric of His life. Now the end was coming. It was Thursday evening following the Last Supper. He had been telling them, at least three times, that He would be handed over to the authorities and crucified. Would His disciples be prepared for the trials soon to come? Would they be able to withstand the stress of seeing their Master on a cross? Would they survive the experience of their whole world seemingly crashing down on them? Immediately before this they had engaged in a rivalry as to who would be the greatest in the new kingdom which they imagined Christ was about to set up.

The Lord had words for Peter especially; maybe because Peter had always been the first to speak up and was so exuberant in his personality; maybe because the Lord foresaw that his faith would be severely tried. He wanted to protect him and prepare him for what lay ahead.

The passage we're going to look at today is not a long one, but it is profound in its meaning both for Simon Peter 2,000 years ago and for us. "And the Lord said, 'Simon, Simon! Indeed Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren.'" Luke 22:31, 32.

Peter had been one of the first to follow Jesus. We read in John's account that Andrew had been a follower of John the Baptist and present when the prophet had pointed to Jesus and said, "'Behold the Lamb of God.'" One of the two who heard John speak, and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his own brother Simon, and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus. Now when Jesus looked at him, He said, 'You are Simon the son of Jonah. You shall be called Cephas' (which is translated, A Stone)." John 1:36, 40-42.

Outspoken and ardent; a bit coarse and rough on the edges, Peter had followed Jesus for the next 3 ½ years. He was one of the three, along with James and John, selected to accompany Jesus on special assignments; to the top of the Mount of Transfiguration; to the inner chamber when the daughter of Jairus was raised from the dead. Later, he would be among those closest to Christ when He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Despite all of these advantages, of having walked the same dusty paths as Jesus, of witnessing His miracles and hearing His sermons and prayers, Simon was in jeopardy. The worst part was, he didn't seem to know that he was! When Jesus shared those words of warning with him, he immediately bristled defensively and professed his faithfulness. "But he said to Him, 'Lord I am ready to go with You, both to prison and to death.'" Luke 22:33.

Peter felt quite sure about his fidelity to his Lord, but Jesus could see that there were traces of weakness in his character. There were hairline cracks in the foundation, perhaps invisible to the human eye, that foretold disaster unless corrected.

Let's go back to the Scripture and glean the lessons there for us. "And the Lord said, 'Simon, Simon!'" The repetition of the first name is a characteristic; a personality trait, if you please, of our Lord. It's an expression of deep concern and agape love. How many times in the Bible can you think when the Lord used that technique?

When Abraham was about to raise his hand above Isaac on Mt. Moriah and plunge the instrument of death into his beloved son's heart, a voice was heard saying, "Abraham, Abraham, do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son from Me." Genesis 22:11, 12.

After hearing the news of his son Joseph's being alive; indeed being the prime minister of Egypt, Jacob pondered whether it was right for him to pull up stakes and go and live in Egypt. "Then God spoke to Israel in the visions of the night, and said, 'Jacob, Jacob!' I am God, the God of your father; do not fear to go down Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there." Genesis 46:2, 3.

At a bush that burned but was not consumed came forth a voice to the shepherd of Midian saying, "Moses, Moses." To a young boy who would become one of the greatest prophets of the Old Testament He said, "Samuel, Samuel." To a troubled and harassed housekeeper Jesus said, "Martha, Martha." To her heart-sick sister on Resurrection Day He said, "Mary, Mary." To an unrepentant city He said, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem." To a fire-breathing persecutor on the Damascus road He said, "Saul, Saul."

There was love and concern in the voice of Jesus when He spoke to Peter the words, "Simon, Simon! Indeed Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat." "Satan has asked for you." In this brief phrase, a world of knowledge is encapsulated. Within these words are embedded the truth of the great controversy between Christ and Satan. There are "rules of engagement" in this

conflict. These words speak to the combatants in the great battle, and their relative positions. For Satan to need to “ask” for permission to carry out his purpose clearly indicates that he is the inferior and that God is the Superior. Let us never forget that! God is more powerful than the devil. The devil may be more powerful than us, but God is on our side, and He is more powerful than the devil. Satan has to ask permission in order to do what he wants to do.

This was brought to view clearly in the story of the healing of the demoniac. When Christ rebuked the unclean spirits in him, they asked permission to enter the 2,000 swine on the hillsides. The story of Job highlights this principle as well, revealing that Satan requested permission to harass and torment the patriarch. This should bring us great encouragement. He Who is with us is greater than the adversary.

Why would Satan want to harass and torment us? Why would he want to give us trouble? Because he is an angel fallen whose sole purpose and delight is bringing pain to the heart of God, through the trials of His children. But he doesn't stop there. Secondly, when he brings hardship on God's children, he then casts the blame for the difficulties and disasters back on God, and gets His children to think that these troubles come from God. Wrong! Notice very carefully the words in this passage. Satan is the one who brings the trials that cause the sifting. Not God. But Satan has to ask permission from God to do it.

Jesus used an agricultural metaphor to describe the trials which Satan would bring against Simon. He said, “Satan has asked for you, that he may *sift you as wheat.*” The word “sift” is from the Greek *siniazō*. This is the only time it's used in the Bible. Back then, everyone knew how wheat was processed and prepared for marketing. The hillsides were graced by the waving crops of grain. At harvest time, you never had to look far to see the farmers with their sickles cutting off the ripened heads.

Then the grain had to be threshed, which was a violent process. Usually it was placed on the ground and cattle were allowed to walk over it, for the purpose of separating the outer worthless husk or hull from the valuable kernel of the grain. Sometimes carts drawn by animals accelerated the procedure. Then the husks had to be separated from the kernels.

This could be done in two ways. The material with the dislodged husks and the kernel could be placed on a flat tray and hoisted up into the air. This was called winnowing. The lighter hulls would be blown away in the wind, while the heavier kernels of grain would fall directly back into the tray. Or, the material could be placed in a sieve and sifted, with the kernels falling through the holes to be kept and the chaff remaining to be discarded, which is the specific process to which Jesus referred. Both methods involved agitation and separation. Everyone had seen harvesting, threshing and winnowing or sifting of the grain and so Christ's analogy was very familiar.

When Jesus said to Simon that Satan wanted to “sift him as wheat,” He was speaking of the “agitation;” the trials that would come upon him to shake him up and try to pull him apart. It would be unmoving and disturbing. It is under stress that character is revealed. It was Satan's

desire to engulf Peter in distress and fear to the point that his faith would be shaken, he would lose his composure and fail the test.

Satan designed that under the duress of the situation Peter would fold and cave in to the pressure. Even though Christ had foretold His death, and the exact manner by which it would be accomplished, the disciples were slow to believe and loathe to comprehend. How could their beloved Master be nailed to a cross? That was impossible! That form of execution was reserved for the most violent and virulent of criminals! That could never happen. But it did! Satan saw to it that the mob before Pilate's seat of judgment was inspired by inhuman hatred and clamored for Christ to be crucified.

The disciples were unprepared to see their Lord treated this way, though Jesus had tried to soften the blow by telling them about it before hand. When it happened, Satan was ready to try their souls, inspiring them to flee the scene and abandon their Master. John came boldly into the courtyard of the high priest, where the trial (if you want to call it that!) was taking place. He was not afraid to be identified with the One Who had been arrested and was being questioned.

Peter, on the other hand, was torn between two feelings. He was deeply conflicted. Part of him wanted to be near Jesus; he had feelings for Him. But then there was the other part, the part that derived its principles from the flesh. There was danger in being too close to Christ in this circumstance; someone might think that he was equally as "deserving" to suffer the same fate as Jesus. It would be costly to be known as a disciple. Remember! He was one of the three closest disciples and had been one of the first to follow Him! So poor Peter was torn between these two poles, and was eventually led to deny His Lord; deny Him with the worst fisherman's language that he even knew him! That was the sifting to which Jesus referred. It would be a severe test.

But it would be a test over which Peter could get the victory. It wasn't pre-determined that he would collapse. It wasn't that success was completely out of reach. Jesus said, "But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail." This certainly indicates that victory could have been his. That's a principle underscored throughout the Bible, and one that Satan hates. He will do everything to make it seem that failure is a necessary outcome of trials. Not true! God has called us to victory, not defeat!

Think of the implications of Christ's statement, "I have prayed for you." That the One Who speaks and worlds appear would take the time to specifically pray for you--what a thought! What power there must be in Christ's words! The tense of the verb indicates that Christ had prayed and would continue to pray for him. He had prayed in the days before, and as His body would be stretched out in the Garden of Gethsemane just hours from now, part of that prayer would include Peter.

Wonderful that God Himself, in Christ, would pray for Simon! Somber and sobering that even the prayer of Christ, without Peter's submission, wouldn't gain the victory. Beautiful that Christ would leave the door open, that following Peter's failure opportunity for restitution would be available.

“When you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren.” Or, as the KJV says, “When you have been converted.”

Yes, the sifting came, just as surely as Jesus had promised. Led by the torch of one of their own, Judas, the soldiers of the Sanhedrin stormed the Garden as if they were in pursuit of a dangerous terrorist. They arrested Jesus and led Him through a series of venues, including the home of Caiphas, the acting high priest. It was in the courtyard of his home that Peter was questioned as to whether he was a part of the group led by the Nazarene and Peter’s faith evaporated like mist on an August day. Fear and self-interest seized him and took over. Suddenly he didn’t want to be associated with the Master. Suddenly the one who had said the previous evening that he would be willing to go to both prison and to death wanted nothing to do with Jesus.

Why was this and how could this have been prevented? And what does this story have to do with you and me? These are the questions on which we will spend our remaining time this morning. The truth was, as sad and shocking as it might seem, Peter didn’t know himself. He was overconfident in his profession of faith. “I’ll go both to prison and death,” he boastfully declared. But he didn’t see the fatal flaw in his character that Christ discerned.

He didn’t know himself. In this respect Peter stands as an illustration of the last church addressed by Jesus in the book of Revelation, the Church of Laodicea, the church that represents God’s people at the end of time. This church, like Peter, thinks that it has it all; it says, “I am rich, having become wealthy, and have need of nothing.” But it doesn’t know that in God’s eyes it is “wretched, poor, miserable, blind and naked.” Revelation 3:17.

What Peter needed is exactly what this church needs; “gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.” Revelation 3:18. These were the things that Peter needed and could have acquired if he had needed the counsel of Christ Who told him and the other sleeping disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation.” Matthew 26:41.

God allowed the test to come so that his faith could be purified; refined in the fire. He allows trials to come to us so that the chaff of unbelief and self can be separated and removed. But this can only happen if self is crucified through earnest prayer and faithful watching. Had Peter heeded that advice, how different the story could have been! Instead, he and the others were heavy with sleep and lacked the energy to pray with earnestness for the victory. When the test came he was not sufficient for it. The flesh overpowered the spirit, resulting in disaster.

A test is coming for us also. The test could come in a variety of ways; Satan knows our weak points. But be assured: there will be a sifting, a winnowing which will reveal the character of our profession. The devil will do anything to cause you to abandon your faith. Beyond the general and wide range of trials Satan brings, Revelation 13 and 14 indicate specifically that God’s people will

be put to a severe test involving the worship of the image of the beast; they will be sifted as was Peter. Satan will cause “shaking” to take place that will seem to pull us apart.

Just before Israel crossed the Jordan to enter Canaan there was a test, a shaking. Satan used a former preacher named Balaam to induce many of God’s people to fall through sensuality and immorality with the idolatry at Baal Peor. Today we find that the temptations of the flesh abound around us. The sins of sensuality and immorality are more prevalent than ever before. Keep your eyes and mind on Jesus and your vessel pure!

Don’t be surprised. Many will leave the church and discard their faith when that time comes. It will cost too much. The trials we experience now are only the forerunners of the great final test, a test which will put to the stress point every fiber of our faith. It will require a faith that will stand up to mockery, ridicule, persecution, loss of property or life itself. It will expose whether things have become idols and are more precious than following the Lord and obeying His commandments.

The good news is, that Christ will give victory to everyone who submits to Him and complies with His will. None need fail. What He said to Peter, He says to each one of us, “I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail.” His simple, but profound counsel to Simon applies with even greater force to us. “Watch and pray lest you enter into temptation.” That’s simple enough, isn’t it? “Watch” means to be wide awake and alert, having our eyes fixed on Jesus.

“Pray;” we know what that is; but the type of praying we need to be doing to prepare for the final test is the type of praying Jesus did in the Garden. His life is the model. The saints of the last days will experience nearly everything that Jesus went through in those last hours. False accusations, ridicule, persecution and the threatening of life; intense pressure to cave in.

There is a difference between the sifting of Simon and the saints at the end of time. Foreseeing his failure, in deepest compassion the Lord said to Peter, “when you are converted, strengthen your brethren.” For Peter, there was time for the tears of repentance and the encouragement of reinstatement. In this respect, the analogy to God’s people at the end doesn’t fit. The final test will come when there will be no more forgiveness offered. Probation will have closed. We won’t be able to coast along and depend on another opportunity to regain our faith. Now is our day of opportunity. Now is the time when we can grow our faith and our love relationship with Jesus. When that day comes, only those with the “faith of Jesus;” only those who have a different life-view than the world does, will survive the sifting. Only those who cherish the principles of His kingdom and the honor of His name above all else will stand the test. Will you be one of them?