
The Sifting Process

By David Wilkerson

July 16, 2001 On the night before his death, Jesus sat down with his disciples to share the Passover supper. The group had an intimate time of communion together. Then, as the meal ended, Christ said solemnly, "The hand of him that betrayeth me is with me on the table" (Luke 22:21). What a horrible truth to be seen at such an intimate moment. Satan had audaciously entered one of Jesus' own disciples, Judas.

Another incredible moment had already taken place at that table. Jesus had taken a piece of bread, representing his broken body, dipped it into wine and extended it to Judas. The scheming disciple then stretched out a demon-possessed hand to receive it. It was as if Satan himself were taking Jesus' body into his hands to crush it.

You may wonder as I have: how was the devil able to possess Judas? No person could fall so far overnight. No one could suddenly be so overtaken by a sin that he would intentionally betray the Son of God, knowing it would lead to his death. Sadly, the truth was that Judas was an easy conquest for Satan. The gospels reveal that Judas had a history of covetousness. He secretly dipped into the group's treasury for himself. And because he harbored this spirit of covetousness, Satan was able to deceive him over time.

The same thing has happened again and again to Christians over the centuries. Satan has brought down multitudes of believers who never allowed themselves to be delivered from a besetting sin. I've seen numbers of godly ministers fall left and right, men once mightily used of God. Over the years, those preachers became entangled in a lust they were never willing to let go of. And they fell hard, losing everything.

Judas himself was mightily used of God. He performed miracles alongside the other disciples, healing the sick and casting out devils. And, like them, he walked closely with Jesus, the living Word. The crowds recognized Judas as a devoted servant of God.

Yet the Bible makes it clear: from the very beginning, Judas was a worker of iniquity. His secret lust was always lurking just beneath the surface. And nothing this blessed man saw or heard in Jesus' life could touch the sin in his heart. Judas was given over to his lust completely. As a result, he was totally overcome by the devil.

I once met a minister who had this experience. He told me, "My dad was a preacher for fifty years, and he was always poor. When he retired, he and my mom were poverty-stricken, barely able to scrape by. A few years ago, as I visited them in their trailer home, a voice rose up in me. I told myself I would never end up poor, like them. I would wheel and deal if I had to, whatever was necessary to be secure."

This man was a leader in his denomination, overseeing many pastors. But soon he was investing in shady real-estate deals. He knew it was wrong, but he couldn't break free of the spirit that hounded him. He was still bound by a fear of ending up poor. Like Judas, this man was an easy mark for Satan, who invaded his covetous heart.

Several years ago, a well-known evangelist was exposed for sexual sin, shocking the world. Multitudes of Christians wondered, "How could such a godly man fall into this kind of sin?" Before this minister was exposed, I called him about what was coming. He confessed he'd been involved in pornography

since he was a child. "I've been harassed for years," he told me. "And I've carried this burden throughout my ministry." In other words, even when he was preaching powerfully, he slipped back into his habit. Obviously, this man's bondage didn't happen overnight. He'd been marked by the devil early on, and he never enjoyed a time of total victory.

I believe multitudes of Christians today are like this man. They're used of God, they worship fervently, and they serve the Lord sincerely. But they've allowed a sin in their life, and over time it has grown deeply entrenched. Now they've become an easy mark for Satan. And the devil has invaded their area of weakness and overtaken them.

Now, at the Passover, Satan knew Jesus' kingdom was about to come. So, once he'd possessed Judas, he determined to go after another disciple. I believe he made his presence felt at that table, as "there was also a strife among them, which of them should be accounted the greatest" (Luke 22:24). Can you imagine this discussion? The disciples just had an intimate time of communion with their Lord, who told them he was about to die. But apparently, they understood nothing of what Jesus said. Instead, they started arguing over who would be left in charge when he was gone.

This had to be a smorgasbord for Satan. He probably sized up the disciples, one by one, wondering, "Who should be next? Not Nathaniel. Jesus said he has no guile. What about John? No, he's too close to the master, always leaning on his bosom. Ah, there sits Peter. Jesus called him a rock. In fact, Christ said he would build his church on Peter's proclamation that he was the messiah. Yes, Peter's the one. If I can just get to him, I can weaken the foundation of the church to come."

Satan Asked for Permission To Test Peter's Loyalty. You're probably familiar with Job's story from the Old Testament. If so, you remember that Satan couldn't touch this godly servant without first obtaining permission from heaven. The Lord told the devil he could only go so far with Job. He could afflict his body, he could take him through baffling trials, but he couldn't kill him.

Now Satan was lobbying to make Peter a target. He said, "Jesus, you claimed you would build your church on this man's testimony. Well, if you're so sure Peter's a rock, let me sift him for a while. You'll find he's no stone for any kind of foundation. Deep down, he's nothing but sand. You know I've already gotten to one of your twelve foundation leaders. Now I'm telling you Peter is going to crumble, just as Judas did."

We already know that the Lord allowed Peter to be sifted. Yet, why was this necessary? I believe the Passover scene gives us insight. Jesus promised his disciples, "I appoint unto you a kingdom...that ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Luke 22:29-30). Jesus' followers had to be ecstatic at hearing this. Their future was totally secure. The Lord himself said they were headed for heaven. He would even reserve seats for them at his dining table. And they all would wear crowns, ruling and reigning with him throughout eternity.

What an incredible pledge of security. Jesus' words were enough to carry anyone through a lifetime, in utter faith and confidence. As Peter listened, he must have felt deeply loved, thinking, "I have an ironclad promise from Jesus. He's going to use me through all eternity. And that absolutely frees me to serve him now, without worry."

Yet, Peter's joy and contemplation were abruptly broken. Jesus suddenly addressed him with this strange warning: "Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat" (22:31). I can imagine Peter's astonishment. He probably exclaimed, "Why would Satan want to have

me, Lord? Is my heart evil? What did I do to be singled out? After all, I'm the one who first acknowledged your deity. When these others doubted, I didn't. I even walked on water with you. So, what do you mean, I'm going to be sifted? Are you saying Satan asked if he could do this to me, and you said yes? Where's your protection over me, Jesus? What's going on?"

At the time, Israel was an agricultural society, so everyone was familiar with the grain-sifting process. Farm workers shoveled piles of grain onto a sifter, or sieve, typically a four-by-four-foot wood frame with a screened bottom. The workers then shook the sieve vigorously, causing all dirt and chaff to fall through the screen to the ground. Only the pure kernels of grain remained.

Sifting is obviously a purifying process, separating the bad and useless from the good and fruitful. You may ask, "Why would Satan want to sift Peter, if only good fruit would come from it?" In my opinion, Satan thought Peter's faith would fail in the shaking. He planned to sift Peter so violently that he could prove the seeds of his faith were only chaff.

Overconfident Peter Had No Idea What He Was About to Face. Peter answered Jesus, "Lord, I'm ready for anything. I'm willing to follow you to prison, to be crucified with you, to die alongside you. You've already told me what's in store for me in eternity. What harm can a little sifting do to me?" (see Luke 22:33). Yet, the truth is, no one is ever ready for sifting. There's nothing we can do in our flesh to prepare for the kind of terrible shaking Peter was about to face.

I believe the Lord allows Satan to sift overconfident, self-reliant Christians in particular. Such well-trained believers are convinced they can handle anything Satan throws at them. They boast, "If the enemy ever tries to bring me down, I'll trample him in God's power. I'll chase him out of my life with the Word. The devil can't touch me."

I hear this kind of boasting from pulpits all across America. Of course, I agree we have victory over Satan by faith in Jesus' work on the cross. Yet, at one time or another, every Christian faces sudden, surprising siftings and never realizes the devil is behind them. Movements are taking place constantly in the spiritual world that we know very little about. We're not to be ignorant of the enemy's devices, but, as Paul says, "For now we see through a glass, darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Perhaps right now you're facing a deep trial, an unexplainable shaking. You're being turned upside down, inside out, and you think it may be because of some evil in you. Yet, the whole time, it's Satan, sifting you like wheat, by God's permission.

Don't misunderstand: the devil can't get to God's people any time he chooses. He can't simply bring us down at will. Moreover, we have this assurance: the only people the Lord allows to be sifted are those he chooses to rebuild his fallen church. Our times of sifting are meant to bring forth our faith intact and pure. Then Jesus can use us in the latter-day work of restoring his church: "As it is written, After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David" (Acts 15:15-16).

Jesus pointed out the difference between sifting and spiritual warfare to his disciples. He told them, "He that hath no sword, let him sell his garment, and buy one" (Luke 22:36). Christ was saying, in essence, "I'm about to leave you. And you're going to face intense spiritual warfare. All this time I've been with you, I've protected you. But now you'll have to live by faith. You'll need to pick up a spiritual sword and fight the good fight of faith.

"Yet, there's something far more trying even than spiritual warfare. It's the sifting process. Sifting is

hand-to-hand combat with Satan himself, a battle that few people ever experience. Peter, you're going to be placed in the enemy's hands for a season. And a sword will do you no good. The devil is about to send an attack that's meant to destroy your faith. He wants to rob you of all the hope I've given you."

When we're being sifted, Satan injects into our minds every evil thing in his demonic arsenal. And he makes us believe these awful thoughts originated in our own hearts, rather than in hell. It's a trial so hellish and despairing, Christ won't let us enter it without giving us his oath to pray us through. He assured Peter, "I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not" (Luke 22:32). He was saying, "Peter, I know full well this is a high-stakes battle over your faith. And I'm going to be praying for you every moment you're under assault. I'm telling you ahead of time, your faith will not fail."

Jesus Prophesied a Severe Testing for Peter. Jesus warned that Peter would be tried so severely, "The cock shall not crow this day, before that thou shalt thrice deny that thou knowest me" (22:34). Yet Peter believed he was ready. A few hours later, when a multitude came to arrest Jesus, the disciple stood up to fight for his master. He boldly drew his sword and cut off a man's ear.

But Peter's sifting didn't actually start until later. It began while Jesus stood before his accusers in the judgment hall. Peter was outside, warming himself by a fire, when a young girl recognized him: "A certain maid beheld him as he sat by the fire, and earnestly looked upon him, and said, This man was also with him" (22:56). As the girl stared, Peter began trembling. He quickly answered, "Woman, I know him not" (22:57).

Now Satan had Peter in the sieve. And he began to winnow him fiercely. The Bible says, "After a little while another saw him, and said, Thou art also of them. And Peter said, Man, I am not" (22:58). By now Peter was shaken, not knowing where his words came from. Finally, an hour later, a third person recognized him and said, "Of a truth, this fellow also was with him...and Peter said, Man, I know not what thou sayest" (22:59-60). At that point, according to another gospel, Peter began cursing.

Try to imagine the scene. Just hours before, this faithful disciple had been Jesus' boldest defender, wielding a sword against all odds. Yet now, Peter was completely broken down, denying he even knew Jesus. Satan must have gloated, thinking, "I've got Peter. He's finished, like Judas. Now, on to the next disciple."

At the very moment of Peter's third denial, Scripture says, "The cock crew. And the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter" (22:60-61). Imagine how Peter must have felt as his master gazed upon him. Yet, I can assure you, the look Jesus gave him wasn't one of accusation. Christ wasn't saying, "How could you do this to me, Peter? You've blasphemed me, denying me, even though these people know you're mine. How could you fall so low, after all I've done for you?"

On the contrary, Jesus had foretold these events for Peter's sake. And now he looked at him to reassure him, as if to say, "Hold steady, friend. I warned you Satan would sift you, remember? He wants to bring you down and destroy my church. But I'm reminding you now, Peter, you're going to be restored. You're important to me. So, don't run from me. This battle is going to end. And there's a great work still ahead for you."

Indeed, Jesus had told Peter, "When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren" (22:32). The literal Greek wording here is, "When you return, be a strength to your brothers and sisters." Christ was saying, in other words, "You're going to deny me, Peter. Yet, I tell you, you're going to be restored."

And afterward, you'll have something vital to give to others. You're going to be a blessing by what you've learned."

This is the very reason God allows our sifting. The apostle Paul writes: "Blessed be...the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God...Whether we be afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effectual in the enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer: or whether we be comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. And our hope of you is steadfast, knowing, that as ye are partakers of the sufferings, so shall ye be also of the consolation" (2 Corinthians 1:3-7).

Clearly, God allows his servants to go through deep waters, enduring crises they can't comprehend, so that they'll be a testimony and comfort to others. In this way, sifted Christians help to rebuild those parts of God's house that have fallen down.

Think about it: Peter's sifting had nothing to do with fleshly temptations, such as lust, greed or covetousness. No, Satan's attack was meant to undermine God's promises to this man. He wanted Peter to be convinced he was totally unworthy of Jesus' pledge to him of heaven. And, for a while, the devil succeeded. After Jesus gazed at Peter, the disciple went out and wept bitterly. Imagine the lies Satan shouted at this broken man:

"So, you're Jesus' rock, eh? You're the one who was going to raise up a ruined church? Look at you, Peter. You're a weakling, a crybaby, a blasphemer. You denied the very one who called you and loved you. If you think you're going to sit at Jesus' table in paradise, forget it. You've sinned against the light of the world. You're not worthy of his promises. You're evil, washed up. Your life is over."

Yet, little did Peter know, he was being equipped with a vital message for the new church: "I've been deeper in despair and hopelessness than you'll ever know. And my Lord brought me out to bring comfort to you.?"

One of the Most Touching Scenes in the Bible Is in John 21. In John 21, Jesus had already risen from the dead and appeared to his followers several times. Surely, when Christ walked through the walls of the upper room, he looked upon everyone, including Peter, with the tender love of the Father.

Even so, Peter was still evidently reeling from his experience. One day, he declared to the others, "I go a fishing" (John 21:3). In other words, he was returning to his career as a fisherman. Peter no longer saw himself as fit for spiritual leadership. He probably thought, "God can't use a man like me. I've sinned as no other person in history has. There's nothing left for me."

You may recall the story from this point. Peter persuaded some of the other disciples to go with him. They fished all night, but ended up catching nothing. Then, in the wee hours of the morning, a figure called out to them from the shore. He told them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat. When they did this, they brought in a haul of fish so heavy, the nets began to tear.

Peter knew the figure had to be Jesus. And immediately, he jumped into the water and swam to shore. He found Christ preparing breakfast for them all. Once the others arrived, Jesus invited them, "Come and dine" (21:12). The Lord was stretching out his hands to his chosen ones, longing to bring them back into full communion with him. And he had Peter in mind, especially.

During the meal, Jesus asked the disciple three times, "Peter, do you love me?" Each time, Peter answered, "Lord, you know I love you" (see 21:15-16). You have to understand, Jesus wasn't asking to be convinced of his disciple's devotion. Nor was he asking this question for the sake of the others. It was all for Peter's sake. Christ was saying to Peter, in essence, "I know you're secure in my love for you. You're convinced I love you completely and unconditionally, in spite of your failures. But I want you to be convinced of something else too. And that is, I KNOW YOU LOVE ME.

"You've returned to me fully, Peter. And I know you're not going to betray me again. I know your heart, and I'm convinced you love me with all your being. So, don't let Satan rob you of that. You're obviously secure in my love for you. Now, be secure in your own love for me. This will prepare you for the work I've laid out for your future. And that is, to feed my sheep" (see John 21:17).

Beloved, our own sifting ends when we can say to the devil, "My Savior loves me unconditionally, through all my sins, because I've returned to his love. Moreover, he's convinced me that, even though I've failed him, he knows I still love him with all my heart. So, you can't rob me of that anymore, devil. I won't allow you to tell me otherwise. I love Jesus, and he knows it."

I Know What It's Like to Enjoy What Peter Enjoyed. Like Peter, I've felt Jesus' special touch in my life. I've clung to a precious promise he gave me, that my last days would be my most fruitful. I've also received from him the Bread of Life in sweet communion. And I've believed his promise that a crown awaits me in glory.

Yet, also like Peter, I've found myself in sudden spiritual battles that were beyond my comprehension. I've endured devilish harassment and lying accusations. And, in each trial, I haven't known whether the cause was my own flesh, the devil, or God's chastening, to purify me of some unknown iniquity. I've identified with Job, who asked God, "Wherefore contendest thou with me" (Job 10:2). Job was saying, "Lord, I don't know what's happening. What is this deep trial all about?"

I believe our sifting experiences are sandwiched between times of powerful revelation and periods of even greater usefulness for the kingdom. Consider what Paul learned through his trials: "We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:5-6).

Paul is saying that, through his trials, he'd learned to preach not himself but Christ alone. By this point in his life, he'd stopped focusing on himself. Now all his teaching, testimony and life were devoted completely to exalting Jesus. Moreover, Paul was receiving increased revelation. He tells us that the Holy Spirit had shone into his heart, bringing even more light by which he could reveal Christ to others. What a wonderful place to be: totally abased, yet full of revelation, light, and a vision of God's glory.

Finally, Paul explains what followed all of his revelations: "We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh. So then death worketh in us, but life in you" (4:8-12).

Notice all the heavy words Paul uses here: trouble, perplexity, persecution, being cast down, bearing

in his body the dying of the Lord Jesus. Simply put, Paul is describing the sifting process. At first, he couldn't understand why every wonderful work of God's Spirit in his life was followed by a turbulent time of shaking. Then the Holy Ghost revealed to him the reason: it wasn't to expose sin in him, or to discipline or correct him. Rather, Paul says, it was for the sake of others: "All things are for your sakes, that the abundant grace might through the thanksgiving of many redound to the glory of God...and eternal weight of glory" (4:15-17).

Paul clearly knew why some believers suffer more trials, endure more shakings, face greater testings: "It's for the sake of the body of Christ. And, ultimately, it's for God's glory. You see, as others watch how you respond in the hottest of fires, they'll realize God won't forsake them in their trying times, either."

Dear saint, the sifting you're going through right now is all for your family, your friends, your coworkers, those around you who love Jesus. So, don't be afraid of your trial. Jesus knows the outcome. And he's telling you, as he told Peter, "Hold fast, friend. I'm praying for you. When all the dust clears, you're going to be restored. And I'm going to use you to rebuild my church. I have an eternal purpose behind your sifting. It's all for the weight of my glory."

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