

Communion

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[0 : 00] today some very good news, some seriously good news, but I'm not going to spoil it by telling you right away, because if I did right at the beginning, then you might just switch off, and that really isn't in my interest at all. So, you're going to have to be attentive as you are able to hear and listen to and about this very good news. Well, this morning, as is evident from the table here below, we are going to celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. And I want us, in preparation for that, to go back to that first occasion on which the Lord's Supper was both instituted and celebrated, as it's recorded for us in the passage that we read in Luke's Gospel.

And in particular, I want us to spend a little time considering the words that were directed by Jesus to Simon Peter. We can read again these words from verse 31, Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat, but I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail, and when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.

Now, we're just going to take these two verses and examine what Jesus says part by part in the order that we have them there before us in these two verses. And if we were to give it some kind of structure or titles to the separate parts of these brief words of Jesus, something along these lines might help. First of all, we have the recognition that prayer is needed. Prayer is needed.

But then also, we have prayer assured. Jesus assures Peter that He has prayed for him. We also have, in these brief words, prayer with an immediate purpose. Jesus tells Peter what it is that He has prayed on behalf of Peter. We also have clearly indicated that this prayer is effective and confident.

And then finally, we have what we might call prayer with a further purpose. Having identified the immediate purpose, we'll notice that in the words of Jesus, He identifies a further purpose. And really, these headings, if you wish, follow each little section of these words of Jesus directed to Simon Peter.

[2 : 35] So, if we begin then by what we said a moment ago concerning prayer needed. Verse 31 really gives us that. Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. Things are going to get nasty for Peter. Things are going to get very difficult for Peter. And Jesus very solemnly warns him of this. He allows him to be privy to this conversation in heaven where Satan directed himself to God and sought permission to test Peter. And Jesus tells Peter, this is what's going to happen. And it's going to be nasty. It's going to be difficult. It's going to be tough. It's going to be like something you've never experienced before.

Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. What is this about? Well, as we noticed in our reading in Job, we have something very similar recorded for us here in Luke's gospel. Satan had requested permission of God to test Peter to test Peter, to place Peter in a situation of extreme, a trial and temptation to make him suffer in a big way, to attack his faith with a view to destroying his faith. The purpose of Satan is very clear. His purpose, his great desire, is not only to attack Peter, but to destroy Peter, to destroy Peter's faith. That is what he is about. That is what he seeks permission to do.

And the picture that is used, or the picture language that is used is agrarians from the farms, chaff being separated from the wheat. And the manner in which that was done involved using, making use of the wind, that as the wheat and the chaff were thrown into the air, so the wind would take away the chaff, and the chaff would be blown away into oblivion. And what would remain would be the wheat. The Bible also uses the language of the chaff being burned. And so, as it is separated, and perhaps some of it or much of it settles, then that is burned, destroyed, effectively no longer existing. And what remains is the wheat. Well, that's the picture that is employed. And this is what Satan wants to do. He wants to blow Peter away. He wants to destroy Peter by means of this trial, this affliction that he is going to place him in.

In fact, Satan had requested this not only for Peter, but for all of the disciples. Then in verse 31, where we read, Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. You'll notice a footnote there that just makes the point that the you in verse 31 is plural. And so, Satan's concern evidently was not only to destroy Peter, but to destroy all of the disciples. Our concern, and Jesus' immediate concern, though not by any means his exclusive concern, but his immediate concern was with Peter, and so it will be with us. But Satan's concern was to destroy all the disciples, to sift all of them as wheat. Now, it's one thing for Satan to make that request of God, asked God that he might sift Peter as wheat. But more disturbingly, at least at first sight, is the very clear implication, indeed the necessary implication of the language used, that the request has been granted. God has given Satan an answer to his request, and it's the same answer that he gave to Satan concerning Job. He says to Satan, go for it. Go for it. You want to sift Peter as wheat? Then be my guest. Go ahead. Do what you plan to do. So, Satan has given permission for this mission that he has set himself on. Peter is soon to be going head to head in a mortal battle with the prince of darkness who masquerades as an angel of light, and he needs help in this battle. He needs the prayer of his Lord and master on his behalf. Prayer is needed by Peter, given what he is about to confront.

[7:28] Now, we could leave it at that, but I think it would be remiss to move on without drawing a couple of important truths concerning Satan that this request reveals. Three things I want to just very briefly notice. The first one is one that I'm not going to dwell on, but it probably is important to make the point, and the first point is simply this, that Satan exists. Now, it may be that I'm largely preaching to the converted on that matter, but it is important to make that point and for us as Christians to be very clear on it. We know that for many the idea of Satan is a very almost a humanist one. You know, some mythological figure, but not somebody who really exists. Well, let us be very clear. Jesus speaks of him very clearly as an invisible power, certainly, but a personality who exists, a fallen angel, the father of lies, a murderer from the beginning, the accuser of God's people. Indeed, that is what his name means, the accuser. So, he is very real. He exists. He exists today to accuse us as God's people today, so let us be very clear on that. But the second thing that we can draw from this is that Satan needs permission before he can test and try God's people.

How profoundly irritating it must be for Satan. How it must serve as an unwelcome and permanent reminder to him of who is in control, that he must ask permission before he can do what he delights in doing, attacking God's people. No autonomy to do as he pleases. No, he must ask permission in the courts of heaven before he can attack you, before he can attack the weakest and the most vulnerable of God's people. He is never allowed to forget that, because I can only imagine that these are requests that are made 24-7. And so, he is constantly reminded of his position of abject subordination to God.

And that is something that he is ever reminded of to his great annoyance and irritation, and no doubt we could use stronger language. He is never allowed to forget, and nor should we, nor should we, that the great enemy of our souls is utterly subordinate to our heavenly Father.

He needs permission. But there's a third thing that I want us to draw from this reference to or this description of, brief though it is, of Satan coming before the Father, seeking permission to sift Peter. And the third thing I want us to notice is this, is that Satan, though he is described in other parts of Scripture as a highly intelligent being, is also profoundly stupid.

Now, why do I say that? Why do I speak of Satan in those terms? What is my basis for saying that? Well, there's a couple of things that we can draw from this text here. First of all, his project, the one that he proposes to God, or indeed the one that he seeks permission from God to undertake, his project is by definition doomed to failure, even before he has begun. What is it that Satan wants to do? Well, we're told he wants to sift Peter as wheat. Now, remember the idea that we just commented a moment ago, the idea of sifting, or of winnowing, is to separate the chaff from the wheat, and it is the chaff that is blown away. It is the chaff that is blown away to oblivion, or in any case is separated and then burnt. The chaff. And that is what Satan wants to do to Peter. He wants to blow him away. He wants to burn him. He wants to destroy him. But it's not going to happen. And why is it not going to happen? Because Peter is not chaff. Peter is wheat. He's a disciple of Jesus. He's a son of God. He is not chaff. There is no possibility of him being blown away as chaff. There is no possibility of him being burnt as chaff because he is not chaff. He is wheat. And that's why I say that this project of

[12:18] Satan is doomed to failure from the very beginning. And you might ask, well, why does he even try? Like, why does he even try to do that which he is simply not capable of doing? Might it be

that he didn't know that Peter was wheat? Maybe he was unsure. He thought, well, it's worth a try. Maybe Peter's a bit like Judas. Maybe he is chaff. Maybe I'll be able to blow him away. Maybe Satan has very bad theology.

He doesn't know about the perseverance of the saints. He doesn't know that a child of God cannot be plucked from God's hand. I don't know. Or maybe that he's just very stupid. Blinded by his visceral hatred of God and his people. So, on that count, we can speak of Satan being profoundly foolish, embarking on a project doomed to failure. But there's a second thing I want us to note in this connection, and it is this, that Satan, in a delicious if somber irony, is actually proposing to do God's work for him. Why do I say that? Why would I say that this affliction of Peter is Satan doing God's work for him? Well, I say that because the Bible is very clear that sifting or winnowing the church or the people of God is something that God Himself considers good and necessary. If we simply limit ourselves to one verse that confirms that, in Matthew chapter 3, and verse 12, we read, and this is John the Baptist, but he's speaking of the work and mission of Jesus.

Probably more helpful to read from verse 11 to have the fuller picture. I baptize you with water for repentance, but after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire. Now, who does John the Baptist say is going to do this? He says that the Messiah is going to do this. This is God's work to sift and to winnow and to burn the chaff and to separate the chaff from the wheat. This is God's work. God's purpose in winning is to both separate the chaff from the wheat and mixing the metaphors, biblical metaphors, to purify his bride and bring her to perfection through affliction, as it is through suffering and trial that our faith is refined and purified and beautified. And so you see why God granted Satan's request. Well, he granted Satan's request because Satan is saying, can I sift Peter? Can I sift the disciples? And Jesus, the Father, says, go ahead. That's my work. That is something necessary.

You want to do it for me, by all means. Hence my conclusion, that though Satan may be highly intelligent, he is also profoundly foolish. And just dwelling on that a little, maybe posing a question that we can't adequately answer, why might that be? Well, might part of the reason why Satan is capable of such folly that hatred dumbs you down. And that's true of the likes of you and me.

[16:08] When we are consumed by hatred, Satan is consumed by hatred of God and of God's people. And when somebody is consumed by hatred, and maybe you know something of this in your own experience, you do really stupid things. You do things that don't make sense. You hurt people in a way that is entirely irrational, that it ends up doing you harm, because you just don't think straight because of the hatred or the resentment that consumes you. And I wonder if that, at least in part, explains the folly of Satan in embarking on this project that was doomed to failure from the very beginning.

Doomed to failure because Peter was not child. He was wheat. Doomed to failure also. Not doomed to failure, but doomed to create, great frustration in Satan when he eventually realizes, if indeed he does, that he was actually doing God's work that had fought him.

Now, having said all this, I'm not intending to, nor is not my purpose to minimize the intensity of the trial Peter and the other disciples were going to face, and especially Peter, by no means.

The trial that he was going to face was indeed intense, deeply intense, and hence the need for prayer, which is what we're identifying, or the heading under which we're considering this first part of the words of Jesus. Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. An intense trial awaited.

And Peter stood in need of the prayer of his Lord. But then, in the words of Jesus, we have a further statement that we are describing under the heading, Prayer Assured. Then in verse 32, that is, having advised Peter, having warned Peter that this great trial is imminent, immediately Jesus assures him, but I have prayed for you. And the immediate assurance that Jesus grants is, first of all, timely, I have prayed for you. He doesn't even say, well, I will pray for you. No, I've prayed for you already. If these words that you are hearing and beginning to process, if you're beginning to imagine, well, what could this be that Satan has asked to sift me? Will I stand firm in the face of such a trial, of such affliction? If that is concerning you, Peter, then be assured of this, that I have already prayed for you. I've already prayed for you in this regard. I know it's going to happen. Indeed, my Father is the one who granted permission for it to happen. I am privy to all of this, and I have prayed for you. And so, there is this assurance of prayer, this timely assurance of prayer.

[19 : 20] The assurance is timely, but we can say also this, that the assurance is personal. I have prayed for you, Simon. We notice in verse 31, Simon, Simon, Simon has asked, sorry, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat, that the you there is plural. And the implication seems to be that the request was that all the disciples would be sifted in this way. But when Jesus addresses Simon, He says, I have prayed for you, and that is in the singular, for you, Simon, Peter. I have prayed for you. I have prayed for you by name. I know the trial that you are going to endure, and I have prayed for you, because I know you, and I love you, and I care for you, and I've prayed for you, especially for you.

I have prayed for you. I have prayed for you, Simon. And is this not a wonderful thing? Is this not a wonderful thing for us as the people of God, brothers and sisters of Simon Peter? Is it not a wonderful thing to know that the eternal Son of God, the Maker and Sustainer of the universe, our Lord and Savior? Is it not a miracle that you are going to be a miracle that you are going to be a miracle?

He prays for you. He prays for you. He sees the trial that you are facing and undergoing and burdened under even today. Indeed, He knows of the trial that you are going to face that you know nothing about.

And He's already prayed. He's prayed for you. You can put your name in that statement of Jesus. But I have prayed for you. Place your name there if you are a child of God. For your Savior prays for you.

And so we have in these words of Jesus not only a clear indication that prayer is needed, but we have these words that assure that prayer has been made for Simon Peter. But then we move on and notice that this prayer has an immediate purpose. What does the text go on to say? But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail, that your faith may not fail. What Jesus is not requesting on behalf of Peter is an easy ride. He's not requesting that some fire wall would be built around Peter that would make him untouchable and protect him from the fiery attacks of Satan. He doesn't ask for that. What he does ask for Peter, and the immediate purpose of the prayer, is that his faith will not fail. That his faith will not fail. Now this does immediately beg the question, is that not what did happen? Did Peter's faith not, in effect, fail? We know that he denied Jesus three times. What more vivid picture of abject failure?

[22 : 29] But we would be wrong to so conclude, because Peter's faith did not fail. Peter fell, yes. Peter failed his master, yes. But his faith was not extinguished. He was not blown away into oblivion as Satan had wished.

He was not burned like chaff. He came through his failings, his failure, his denial. His faith did not fail.

It's very clear that Jesus understands it in that way, because having assured him that his faith would not fail, he then immediately goes on to say that you're going to deny me. So clearly, Jesus does not equate Peter denying him as equivalent to his faith failing. And it's no different for us. Jesus prays for us in the same manner. There's no guarantee, quite the reverse, that to live the Christian life as we are intended to do so, will be an easy ride. But the assurance that ultimate failure is simply not a possibility is an assurance that holds true for you if you are a believer in Jesus Christ. But we can move on and notice that in the words of Jesus, we are confronted with prayer that is effective and confident. What does Jesus go on to say there in the second half of verse 32? You know, we have the luxury of looking back at how events unfolded and especially Peter's restoration and decades of fruitful and faithful service, so we know that the prayer of Jesus was effective. But my point here is to focus on Jesus' own confidence before the event. Jesus says, notice carefully what he says, Jesus says, when you have turned back. He doesn't say, if you turn back.

[24 : 26] He doesn't say, well, hopefully you'll turn back or in all probability you'll turn back or that's what I want to happen. No, he says, when you have turned back. When you have turned back. There is no doubt in the mind of Jesus.

He says to Peter, you're going down, but you're not staying down. You're going down, yes, but you're not staying down. And why the confidence of Jesus? Well, the confidence is grounded in many ways, but we can certainly say this, that the Father always grants the Son every request that he makes, with one exception, one that occurred on this very night. Let this cup pass from me. The only request that the Father denied his Son. But when the Son prays for his people, for his brethren, for his own, these requests are always granted. Hence, Jesus' confidence, when you turn back,

when you turn back. And this is true for you, Christian friend. Perhaps you have fallen. You will be restored. Perhaps you are down. You're not staying down. Now, we are not passive in all of this. And I'm aware of the danger that this might inculcate a passivity. Well, I'll just wait until I'm restored, until the Lord lifts me up again. And that would be wrong to come to that conclusion. We can't develop that this morning. But we can certainly state with confidence that though we fall, we will be lifted up.

Before we look at the final part, just pause and consider what good news this is. It is seriously good news. Jesus prays for you. He prayed for you in the garden, as we are able to read in his high priestly prayer in John's gospel in chapter 17. We won't turn to it this morning. And he continues to intercede for you at the right hand of the Father. The Bible tells us that the prayer of a righteous man availeth much. What about the prayer of the righteous man? What about the prayer of the righteous man?

I rest my case. We can be assured. We can be assured that his prayer on our behalf is effective. Finally, in these words, we notice that the prayer of Jesus has a further purpose. The immediate purpose was that Peter's faith would not fail. But the further purpose is to be found in the final words, and when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers. The trial, the affliction, even the threefold denial served a purpose. And of course, the preservation of Peter's faith through the trial served the same purpose, to prepare Peter for subsequent more faithful, more effective, more humble, perhaps especially more humble service of others. Nothing has changed. This is the further purpose that Jesus has in mind as he prays for Peter, that when he is turned back, when he is restored, when he is upstanding again, he can strengthen his brothers. And in that regard, it is also true that nothing has changed. As the Lord restores us, as he graciously lifts us up when we fall and fail, he does so with that further purpose, not only that our faith would not fail, but that having been restored, we might be better able to serve others fruitfully and effectively and humbly and lovingly and graciously conscious of where we have been lifted up. And again, so much more could be said, but we leave it at that. Christian friend, and I do conclude by addressing you in that way advisedly, Christian friend, because these truths and these assurances are assurances for the sons and daughters of God.

[28 : 39] There is no indication in Scripture that Jesus prays in this manner for those who are not his own, and that is a solemn truth, but that we cannot but mention, if not develop. Christian friend, you are seriously blessed. You have an advocate at the right hand of God, a friend in high places in the very highest place. Jesus, the great high priest, intercedes for you. He has prayed for you, and he continues to pray for you. Well, let us pray.

Heavenly Father,