

That Faith may not fail

Luke 22:24-34 WCF 17.2&3

The occasion of Jesus and Peter's exchange was the Last Supper. This took place on the evening before Jesus time of prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, his arrest early the next morning, his trial and his crucifixion.

At this last Supper Jesus broke bread and poured out wine to illustrate the immense blessing his followers would receive through his death. It was the perfect illustration. Bread nourishes the body, wine makes the heart glad. So too Jesus death on the cross takes away our sin and gives us hope. As the Heidelberg Catechism puts it "nourishes our souls for eternal life."

However back then Jesus disciples didn't realise the significance of what Jesus meant. They would later but not back then. They were looking forward to the Kingdom Jesus said he would confer on his disciples. They were eagerly anticipating their own privileged positions of leadership. They appeared to be full of optimism and wondering what great plan Christ has in store for them. Verse 30 gives us that idea. Yes they were excited about their prospects and even argued about who would be the greatest!

Little did they realise that they were on the cusp of a great spiritual battle and that at the height of that battle Satan in a last desperate attempt would try and minimise the victory Christ was about to have on the cross and at the resurrection. Satan would try and minimise that victory by destroying the faith of the disciples, through doubt, fear and denial of Christ.

The Westminster Confession reminds us of this. One of Satan's tactics is to tempt the followers of Christ and cause them to fall into serious sins to wound their consciences and destroy their faith!

The question is can Satan succeed in destroying true faith in Christ?

We'll endeavour to answer that question in this exposition and then think about some further implications for the church.

1. Can Satan succeed?

The text in the NASB tells us that Satan demanded permission to test Peter. A literal translation from the Greek says that Satan asked to sift Peter. It reminds us of the story of Job where Satan demanded to test Job whom Satan accused of having a faith so shallow that as soon as Job loses his blessings he'll also lose his faith! So went the accusation.

That's what was happening here with Peter whom Jesus calls Simon. Jesus calls him Simon because soon Peter would not look like the rock on which Christ was to build his church i.e. Peter's confession of Christ but he'd be more like the man before he made the confession, the weaker Simon a fisherman with little knowledge and faith.

Jesus knew that Peter's faith and the faith of the other disciples was about to experience a violent shaking. They'd be like kernels of wheat which are vigorously shaken in a sieve, violently tossed around in order to separate the kernels from the husks.

Well that kind of a shaking might be OK if we can compare the husks to any character flaws the disciples had. But that of course wasn't Satan's intent. He wanted to shake them so hard

that the kernels representing the faith of the disciples would fly out of his sieve and be lost. Satan wanted to make them lose their nerve during that long night of fear and anxiety. He wanted to shake them as Jesus was arrested and taken away to be tried and scourged. It was Satan's desire that as the disciple's hopes of a glorious kingdom evaporated as Jesus hung dying on the cross, that they would lose their faith.

And for a while it seemed as though Satan was succeeding. Judas had already betrayed Jesus. And Peter has already resorted to violence when he attacked the soldiers with his sword and cut off one of their ears! Before the night was over all the disciples had deserted and Peter who promised to protect his master ended up denying Jesus three times.

In that manner Satan cleverly directed his attack against the apostles of the future; the founding members of the church and it appeared he would succeed.

Well Satan had his little hour of power but as with the testing of Job, so here with Peter, Satan was really just a pawn in God's plan of salvation. All it took to prevent Satan from having the victory was one little prayer. Jesus said "I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail." Before Peter's faith was shaken to the core with his threefold denial of Christ, Christ focused his love and intercession on Peter. He prayed for Peter, opposing Satan and as a result Satan's desire to destroy Peter's faith in Christ failed.

Even so it was a shocking ordeal. When Peter denied Jesus the third time he saw Jesus looking at him and remembered what Jesus had said earlier. Peter wept bitterly. He had denied his Lord. He had turned away from his dearest friend and master who had taught and loved Peter for three years. Peter failed as a disciple and a friend and may have gone the way Judas went but for the fact that Jesus prayed for him.

In John 17 we find that Jesus actually prayed for the other disciples too and indeed for all believers. Verse 20 of John 17 says, "My prayer is not for them alone but for all who believe in me through their message." That prayer was made for all believers and guarantees the believers perseverance. It's a prayer which is for us now. It's a prayer for all those who believe in Jesus as their personal Savior.

Now let's put ourselves in Peter's shoes for a moment. Has there ever been a period in your life that you'd rather forget? Have you ever felt that your sin has been too gross and extensive that you thought to yourself, "God can't possibly forgive this sin." But what a thought!? Who are we putting such limits on Almighty God? Any way when we have thoughts like that that's the time Satan is doing his worst. He's accusing you before the throne of God. He's accusing you in your conscience. He wants you to believe that your sins are too great and wants you to utterly despair of those sins.

The Apostle Paul had a similar experience. Romans 7 tells us that he looked at his life saw how sinful it was and almost despaired. "What a wretched man I am" he wrote.

But then he looked to Christ and remembered the significance of the cross. "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ." (Romans 8:1)

The Westminster Confession reflects Paul's realism in asking "how are the doctrines of grace compatible with serious sin in the believer's life and particularly the doctrine of perseverance?" It recognises that even as believers we do at times fall into serious sins but if we trust in the "effectiveness of the merit and intercession of Christ" as the Westminster

Confession puts it, then he will be our advocate. God the Son will present our case before God the Father who has and will declare us righteous.

As the believer's advocate, Christ pleads our case against Satan, presenting His sacrifice on the cross as the grounds for our forgiveness. In fact Christ stands before God as the authorised intercessor by virtue of that sacrifice and so his intercession for us can't possibly fail. Satan's attempts to shake and destroy our faith will come to nothing at the side of Christ's intercession. He cannot succeed.

2. That leads me to the second thing implications for the church today. a) *The first* is that this account reminds us again of our reliance on God. We can't do it ourselves as Peter's experience shows. Peter was arguably the boldest disciple. His boldness comes out in his declarations of loyalty and the like such as verse 33 when he said "Lord I am ready to go with you to prison and even death". Consider also the one recorded in Mark 14:29 where Peter said "lord even if everyone else falls away , I won't!" As far as Peter was concerned , denial of his master wasn't even a remote possibility. He was certain of it. Christ could count on Peter!

How the mighty fall! And what a fall it was. Instead of supporting Jesus as Peter boasted, Peter contributed to the total forsakenness of Christ by denying him. Peter could neither help Christ nor save himself. Instead his faith; his soul was saved by the intercession of Christ. He was carried along by something which didn't arise out of himself.

That's how it is with us too. We can't survive spiritually without Christ. We can't survive without His intercession, His word, His Spirit, His body the church. We can't do it alone and the way we can begin to acknowledge that is to humble ourselves before God in prayer, stay close to God's people and confess our reliance on Christ.'

b) *A second implication* is that with Christ as our advocate we can live with the confidence that our faith will not fail. The way the clause "that your faith may not fail" is written in the original Greek text, is as a condition of fact. In other words it predicts a specific reality and so the mood of the whole sentence is definite rather than doubtful. What it means is this: Those for whom Christ died can never again fall under condemnation. Christ's constant intercession guarantees it. Listen to how Hebrews 7:25 puts it. "Therefore He is able to save completely those who come to God through him because he always lives to intercede for them". And so the question then is how can those whom Christ represents before the throne of God, those for whom Christ died not proceed to eternal life? Do you trust in Jesus Christ as your Saviour, if so the promise here is 'your faith cannot fail'.

c) *A third implication* is that we learn something about the importance and value of prayer. Jesus taught this when he said to Peter, "go and strengthen your brothers." Well that is exactly what Peter did from his Pentecost sermon onward. The rest of his life was devoted to Christ and His church. So are his letters which include several encouragements to prayer such as 1 Peter 5:7 "cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." In fact a healthy prayer life is emphasised throughout the NT. For example in 1 Tim 2:2 we are urged to pray for kings and those in authority over us" In James 5:15 we learn that "the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective".

So Jesus ask Peter to strengthen his brothers and it reminds us that prayer is an important part of our lives. God hears and answers our prayers. Pray for me as I pray for you. Pray for one another. Pray for your city, your country, pray against Satan's schemes because

d) Finally this passage shows us that Satan (though a pawn in God's hand) is nevertheless a formidable enemy. He is an arch angel who once had the status of Michael and Gabriel but who became proud and selfish, wanted to be like God and fell away taking many angels who sinned likewise with him. Ever since he has been God's adversary, always opposing and attempting to thwart God's plan of salvation and destroy God's people. Satan tried it with Job. He tried it with Israel, for example when the Persian king ordered the annihilation of the Jews, we read about that in the book of Esther. Satan tried several times to destroy Christ; at His birth through Herod, during the 40 day temptation in the desert, in the Garden of Gethsemane and during his arrest, His trial and crucifixion. But Satan failed to defeat Christ and so now in his death throes Satan relentlessly attacks the church. He is depicted in Revelation 12 as a dragon chasing a woman (representing the church) through the wilderness. In 1 Peter 5:9 he depicted as the prowling lion seeking to pounce on and devour members of the church.

Occultists get their power from Satan. He is the Tempter. He wants us to be tempted into sin. He also imitates Gods work in order to deceive. For example the Muslim religion is a Satanic religion, its people believe they are following the god Allah. The truth is they are following Satan. He rules their malignant spiritual world. Through Islam Satan also viciously accuses God's people before the throne of heaven.

However as true as this may be, Satan's power is limited by God. He needed permission to test both Job and Peter and you and me. And you know in Revelation 20:1,2 it says that "an angel came down from heaven with a great chain and lay hold of the dragon and bound him for 1,000 years!" We understand this 1,000 years to symbolise the time between the first and second comings of Christ. During this time Satan's powers have been limited in such a way that he cannot prevent the spread of the church or spiritually harm any of those for whom Christ has died and for whom Christ is praying. He may sift us. He may be given permission by God to involve one of us in a serious car accident, he may cause a cancer to grow so as to take a loved one away, he may strike us with sickness, poverty and ridicule as he did to Job, but he cannot break our Spirit because we have the Holy Spirit and because Christ is interceding for us.

That is our comfort. Satan is powerful and he is evil. But he is certainly no rival power to God. He can only do as God permits and so we need not fear.

So let's remember that the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective and that therefore the prayers of Jesus Christ cannot fail and so our salvation is not in question.

So if you feel plagued in your conscience by sin, if you struggle with self-doubt and insecurity remember Peter's awful trial. Remember that Satan has used all his power to undermine and stop the progress of the church and has failed! All it took was one brief prayer. Take courage. Jesus has also prayed for you that your faith may not fail.

Amen.