

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps you heard about the scandal involving a pastor. He was at a public gathering and he cursed and used profanity—there was even a teenage girl present. Some of the deacons called a special meeting and said, "Did you hear what the pastor did? He publicly cursed—in front of a young person, too!" Of course, word of the incident spread to the deacons' wives, and soon it was all over town. The story spread from one person to the next (a secret is something you only tell one person at a time). When people heard about it, most of them said, "Why I don't want to have anything to do with a man like that! I'm through with him! He should be fired!"

The Pastor's name was Reverend Simon Peter, and I'm glad the Lord Jesus Christ didn't give up on him. And if you've ever blown it in a major way, I've got good news for you: Jesus hasn't given up on you either. Let's read about it in Luke 23:31. Take note of the context. Jesus and the disciples have gathered in an upper room to share the last supper. It's just a matter of hours before Jesus will be arrested and crucified. Jesus predicted one of the disciples would betray Him—that led to an argument among the disciples about who was the greatest. Jesus turned to Simon Peter and said,

"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."

But he replied, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death."

Jesus answered, "I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me."

Then Jesus asked them, "When I sent you without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?"

"Nothing," they answered. He said to them, "But now, if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one. It is written: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors'; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment."

The disciples said, "See, Lord, here are two swords."

"That is enough," he replied.

Jesus wasn't advocating all the disciples arm themselves to the teeth. In fact, two swords were *more* than enough. Later that evening when Peter takes a swipe at one of the people trying to arrest the Lord, Jesus told him to put away his sword. Now skip down to verse 54 and let's read about what happened to Peter after Jesus was arrested:

Then seizing him, they led him away and took him into the house of the high priest. Peter followed at a distance. But when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them. A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, "This man was with him."

But he denied it, "Woman, I don't know him," he said.

A little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them."

"Man, I am not!" Peter replied.

About an hour later another asserted, “Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean.”

Peter replied, “Man, I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: “Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times.” And he went outside and wept bitterly.

In this message we are going to learn four life-changing principles:

1. SATAN WANTS TO BRING YOUR FLAWS TO THE SURFACE

Jesus told Simon Satan wanted to sift him like wheat. That means Satan wanted to bring all his flaws and imperfections to the surface. When wheat was picked the kernels were separated from the husks and placed in a large sieve and shaken up. The smaller, heavier wheat kernels fell through the holes, and the lighter, larger husks remained in the sieve. Sifting always involved shaking. We have a kitchen implement called a sifter. Let me demonstrate how it works. Back in the olden days, women actually cooked food in their kitchens! I’m not talking about re-warming take-out food in the microwave—I’m talking about a full meal made from scratch. If you look hard enough in your kitchen you may find a hole in the wall with a door that opens—that’s called an oven. And although your mom may use it to store potato chips, it actually heats up and will cook food.

Back when women used to bake bread they sifted the flour. Before our highly refined flour, there were often lumps and or other hard particles in the flour. By “sifting” the flour, only the light flour was used, and the sifter strained out all the lumps and imperfections.

Satan has a plan for your life just as God does. Satan’s first plan is to keep you away from God. Some people laugh whenever I talk about the devil. They say, “You are always talking about how much trouble you have with the devil. He never bothers me.” If you aren’t clashing head-on with the devil, it could be you are going in the same direction he is. You can’t butt heads with someone if you’re walking side by side.

When you fall in love with Jesus, like Peter, you become a target of the devil. Satan doesn’t give up on you when you become a follower of Jesus; he simply changes his strategy, and intensifies his attack. He wants you to fail and to fail miserably. That’s why he sifts you—so all of your mistakes, flaws, and weaknesses are brought to the surface. He does this to make you feel rotten about yourself. The Bible calls the devil the Accuser of the brethren. When you give in to his temptation, he slips up to you and says, “See, you might as well give up. You’re no good, you’re no good, you’re no good, baby, you’re no good!”

Satan is strong, but he is limited by the Lord Jesus. Jesus said Satan has asked to sift Simon. The word literally means the devil demanded to sift Peter as wheat. Think about it, the devil wanted to sift Peter, but he didn’t have the authority to do anything without God’s permission. Do you remember Job? Satan appeared before God and requested to be able to bring pain and trouble into Job’s life to show God the *only* reason Job loved God was because he was so blessed. God

granted Satan that opportunity but He limited him—He said, "You can't kill him." So we don't really have to be afraid of the devil. He can't do anything to us without God's permission.

The devil decided he would pick a certain Sunday and visit a little country church to try to scare the people. In the middle of the message the old devil knocked on the back door of the church and headed down the center aisle yelling and waving his arms. The pastor turned and ran, and the choir members emptied the loft. People were so terrified they jumped out the windows and crowded through the doors. The devil was chuckling at his success when he saw one old man still sitting his pew. The devil walked over began to try to scare the man using his most hideous voice. The man sat there with his arms crossed, and smirked as he said, "Devil, you can't scare me—because I've been married to your sister for the last 30 years!"

Don't let him scare you. Satan is limited in what he can do to you and he can't do anything without God's permission! He can sift you but he can't stop you; he can discourage you but he can't destroy you; he can tempt you and even terrify you, but he can't take you!

2. JESUS IS PRAYING FOR YOU

Jesus told Peter, "Satan has asked to sift you as wheat, but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail." You may wonder why Jesus didn't say, "Satan has asked to sift you as wheat...but I'm not going to let him do it, Peter." God allows the devil to sift us because He knows sometimes the result of sifting can be good for us.

In a sifter, the flour is turned upside down, agitated, and shaken up. Have you been going through any agitating experiences where it seems everything in your life has been turned upside down? Welcome to sifting zone.

Jesus said, "Peter, I'm going to let Satan sift you good. But I'm going to pray for you." Wow! You may say, "I wish Jesus would pray for me like that." He has and He is. A few hours after the last supper, Jesus prayed a beautiful prayer that is recorded in John 17. This is what He prayed, "My prayer is not for them alone (original disciples). But I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message." (John 17:20) He was praying for Peter, James, John, and Andrew and the others of the twelve, but He was also praying for those who would believe because of the message of these disciples. He was praying "Father I'm praying for Eusebius, Ignatius, Polycarp, and the others." He was praying for every generation of Christians all the way to this current generation. He prayed, "I'm praying for Mike, George, Mary, etc."

The good news is Jesus prayed for you past tense, but the better news is He is praying for you present tense. Hebrews 7:25 says Jesus "ever lives to make intercession for us."

You say, "Okay, but what is Jesus praying for me?" He's praying the same thing He prayed for Peter, that your faith won't fail. He didn't pray that Peter would get faith, but the faith he had wouldn't fail. Let's imagine you are in a room and someone offers you a crooked deal that will earn you a million dollars—but you have to lose your integrity and honesty to do it. You might be tempted to take that offer. But what if Jesus Christ was kneeling right there beside you praying for you that your faith wouldn't fail, wouldn't it make it easier to say, "No?"

Girls, when some pimply faced boy tries to get you to trade in your virginity before marriage, would it make a difference if Jesus was there kneeling beside you praying, "Father, Mary is being sifted, but I pray that her faith won't fail?" Mister, if you're on a business trip and a prostitute approaches you in the hotel elevator and asks you to buy her a drink. What if Jesus was there kneeling in the elevator, praying, "Father, John is being sifted, but I pray his faith won't fail." You name the temptation, Jesus IS there praying for you—you just can't see Him with your physical eyes.

3. JESUS KNOWS YOU BETTER THAN YOU KNOW YOURSELF

Old proud Peter said, "Don't worry Lord. These other losers may leave you—but not ME! I'm willing to go to prison for you! Why, I'm willing to *die* for you!" I'm sure Jesus must have smiled when he said, "Peter, before the rooster crows tomorrow morning, you'll disown me not once, not twice, but three times." It's not recorded, but I imagine Peter said, "No way, Lord! You don't know me." But Jesus *did* know Peter. He knew him better than Peter knew himself.

And Jesus knows you and He knows me better than we know ourselves. He knows every time you've failed in the past, and He knows every time you'll fail in the future, and yet He loves you.

There are two dangerous extremes you need to avoid. First, be careful you never get so full of pride you think you are beyond committing the most hideous, heinous sin imaginable. My heart is breaking for the family in New Chapel Hill that suffered the death of those two little boys. I'm hurting for our friends at First Assembly God who have been devastated by this tragic event. As their brothers and sisters in Christ this is a time when we need to go down and wash their feet to help them through this tough time.

But whenever you hear of a tragedy like that, don't say, "How horrible, I could *never* do anything like that." You could, and I could. Peter said, "Lord, I'll *never* deny you!" The Bible says, "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." (Proverbs 16:18). If you ever think you can get to a point where you are beyond sin, you are deceiving yourself. John wrote, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." (1 John 1:8)

The other extreme you need to avoid is saying, "Well, since all my sins past, present, and future are forgiven, and Jesus knows all my future failures, what's the big deal about sin?" Yes, your sins can be forgiven, and you'll never suffer the eternal consequences of your sin, but you still have to suffer the early consequences of your sins. Peter was forgiven, but he suffered great shame and disappointment. God can even forgive the sin of murder; after all he forgave King David for killing Uriah. But David suffered long and hard for his rebellion. God can forgive a murderer, but there are terrible consequences to face. So my friend, run from sin. Strive to live a holy lifestyle. But don't ever get so cocky you think you're beyond falling into sin.

4. FAILURE DOESN'T HAVE TO BE FINAL

That’s the great lesson we can learn from Simon Peter. He was sifted by Satan, and he denied the Lord, but that wasn’t the last chapter of his life. Some of you have failed before. You’ve been a part of a failed marriage, or a failed business, or a failed dream. Maybe you’ve had a moral failure, a mental failure, or you’ve failed financially.

Just because you have failed in the past doesn’t mean you’ll be a failure forever. It’s how you finish that really matters. In the 1920s there was a struggling artist named Walter. Walter lost his first job then he started a business in St. Louis called Laugh-o-grams. It went into bankruptcy–but he refused to quit. He moved to California where his brother lived, and there he came up with the idea of a mouse cartoon. This artist, whose name was Walter Disney wanted to name the mouse Mortimer, but his wife Lilian suggested Mickey Mouse. The rest, as they say, is history. He failed twice in business, but he didn’t give up. Life is full of failures, what really matters is what you do *after* you fail.

Winston Churchill had the tenacious personality of a bulldog. He once said “Success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.”

Let’s see what happened to Peter that night as we follow the steps of a fellow sinner:

1. He sinned

Because of Peter’s pride, he was a wreck just waiting to happen. In the courtyard outside the house of Caiaphas, he stood around warming himself at a fire while Jesus was inside being subjected to an illegal trial. A little servant girl pointed out he was a disciple of Jesus. “No, I’m not!” Another man said, “I can tell by your accent, you’re a Galilean, you’re one of Jesus’ men.” Galileans were hicks from the country, so I can just hear Peter changing his accent and saying, “No, you must be mistaken, I don’t know the man.” By now, he was sweating bullets, and they crowded around him. Paranoia struck deep–into your heart it creeps. Another says, “You *are* a disciple of Jesus.” Then Peter cursed like the sailor he was and said, “May I be damned if I know that Jesus!” And just at that moment the rooster crowed.

Most of us have failed the Lord before, sometimes we don’t even realize it until we hear God’s rooster crowing away. He uses all kinds of roosters to remind us we fail. Some of you are right where Peter was when he denied the Lord. You have made some terrible mistakes, and God is dealing with you about those mistakes. If you take the next few steps Peter took, you’ll survive Satan’s sifting.

2. He suffered and repented

It says in verse 61 at that moment, the Lord turned and looked at Peter. In Jerusalem today, there is a church built over the site where this took place. The name of the church is St. Peter’s in Gallicantu. (*galli-cantu* is Latin for cock-crowing). There is the figure of a large rooster on the pinnacle of the church’s steeple. Inside there is a beautiful mosaic of this scene. Peter is standing at the fire and has just denied Jesus. Jesus is being led to a holding cell by the soldiers. In that instance, the eyes of Jesus are locked onto Peter’s eyes. Peter can’t escape the gaze of the Lord.

He didn't have to say a word, but His expression surely said, "See, I told you. But I still love you."

Peter ran out of the courtyard and wept bitterly. He suffered for his failure. Do you want to know how you can tell for sure you are a true follower of Jesus? When you fail the Lord, it will break your heart, it will make you miserable. A counterfeit Christian can sin and rebel, and fall, and it doesn't bother them.

Have you ever wept over your sin like Peter did? Peter's misery led him to repent. The Bible says, "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death." (2 Corinthians 7:10) *The Message* paraphrase: "Distress that drives us to God turns us around...but those who let distress drive them away from God...end up on a deathbed of regrets."

Do you know the difference between Judas and Peter? Judas had remorse and he regretted what he had done—he was sorry, but he didn't repent. It led to his death. Peter was sorry, and He repented. He was back with the other disciples and he was running to the empty tomb with John on Easter morning.

My friend, if you have failed, it should break your heart, but don't just regret it, like Judas. Repent of your sin—that means to turn from it and to run back to God!

3. He stood up

Jesus prayed for Peter, was His prayer answered? Absolutely. Peter had fallen, but his faith hadn't failed, because after Peter fell, he got back up on his feet. When you fall down, if you stay down, then you are a failure. But if you fall down and keep getting up, you're never a failure.

Coach Bear Bryant was the legendary football coach at Texas A&M, then at the University of Alabama. Once, a high school coach tried to get Bear to sign an undersized linebacker. The coach said, "In one game he got knocked off his feet, and he got back up. On the next play, the same guy knocked off his feet again, and he still got up. The same guy knocked him down a third straight play, yet he jumped back up. Isn't that the kind of player you're looking for, Coach Bryant?" Bear said, "No, I'm looking for that guy who keeps knocking him down!"

Some of you have been knocked down—in fact you're on the ground right now. Just because you've failed, it doesn't make you a failure—unless you stay down.

Peter fell but he didn't stay down. In fact, we read just a few weeks after he denied knowing Jesus he boldly preached to thousands of people in Jerusalem. Then Peter stood up, raised his voice and addressed the crowd...those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day." (Acts 2:14, 41)

What was the difference between Peter the Coward standing around a fire and Peter the Courageous preaching to thousands? He had met the risen Lord and he was filled with the Holy Spirit. If you have fallen, look to Jesus and then get back on your feet and keep on trusting him!

4. He strengthened his brothers

Jesus knew Peter would fail. But He also knew he would turn back. In verse 32 He said, "And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." The King James Version says, "And when you are converted strengthen your brothers." Jesus wasn't talking about salvation because Peter had already been cleansed by Jesus. The word really means, "when you are changed." When we go through Satan's sifting, we are always changed. Some are changed for the better, and some for the worse. Peter survived Satan's sifting—but Judas did not.

Peter became one of the great leaders of the early church. He wrote a couple of letters that have been strengthening Christians for centuries. For instance, he wrote, "Cast all your anxiety upon him because he cares for you...and the God of all grace, after you have suffered a little while will himself restore you and make you strong, firm, and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen." (1 Peter 5: 7, 10)

CONCLUSION

I've never seen an episode of the popular television show "Survivor", but I've read about it. It's called Reality TV—but how *real* is it to put groups of people in isolated areas and then plan games for them to compete against each other?

On the other hand, Aron Ralston is a true survivor. As he was rock climbing alone in southeastern Utah a couple of weeks ago, a huge boulder shifted, pinning his right arm. After three days he was out of food and water, so he made a decision to cut off his lower right arm using his cheap multi-use tool. Using a pair of biking shorts as a tourniquet, he began to cut away. After cutting through his tissue, the dull knife would not cut through the bone, so with sheer willpower, he broke the bones of his wrist to finally free himself. It had taken him two days to complete his release. Then he rappelled down 60 feet and walked six miles back toward his car. On the way, he met a couple of hikers who called for help. I think we should call Aron Ralston the survivor. When he considered the options, none of which were good, he sacrificed his arm so he could live.

The Lord Jesus was facing an obstacle as well. Next week we'll see that when He considered the cross before Him, He shuddered with repulsion. Yet, He was willing to sacrifice more than an arm to save Himself, He gave His life, so we could live. If you will turn from your sins, and trust Him for life, He will forgive your mistakes and will make you a new person.

Just remember, Satan wants to sift you to bring your imperfections and flaws to the surface. But Jesus is praying for you, your faith won't fail. So even if have failed the Lord before, don't quit, run back to him and He can still use you.

OUTLINE

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2. JESUS IS PRAYING FOR YOU

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3. JESUS KNOWS YOU BETTER THAN YOU KNOW YOURSELF

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THE STEPS OF A FELLOW SINNER:

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes