

THE SAVIOR ...
WHO KNEW HOW TO PRAY

And the Lord said: Simon, Simon, behold Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren. (Luke 22:31-32)

The best way to understand and appreciate a text in the Scriptures is to look at it through another biblical window. One of the most significant statements in the Epistle to the Hebrews is found in chapter 7, verse 25:

Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.

This thrilling statement may be divided into three sections:

1. The Savior's Ability to save them to the uttermost";
2. The Sinner's Acquiescence them that come unto God by him";
3. The Saint's Advocate he ever liveth to make intercession for them."

The writer to the Hebrews was evidently a man who possessed great knowledge of the services and sacrifices of the temple. He was also acquainted with the unprecedented trials besetting the people of his generation. Increasing problems were testing the faith of many of his compatriots. Their outlook was bleak and their faith weakening. To encourage those people, the writer of this remarkable letter directed the attention of his readers to the risen Christ. He assured them that the new High Priest was interceding at the right hand of God and was

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able to sustain those who trusted Him. This wonderful fact is easily recognized when considered with the temptation that threatened to destroy the ministry of Simon Peter. That depressing episode in the life of the apostle appears to be a window through which the beauty of the text in Hebrews may be viewed.

The Coming Storm ... "Satan hat/i desired to have you"

The words of Jesus are informative; they express a truth not apparent in the Authorized Version of the Bible. The word *exeerasato* meant much more than a casual desire. Dr. Mayer translates it: "Satan has asked excessively," and the entire passage in the Amplified New Testament reads, "Simon, Simon (Peter), listen! Satan has asked excessively that (all of) you be given up to him—out of the power and keeping of God—that he might sift (all of) you like grain. But I have prayed especially for you [Peter] that your town] faith may not fail." The Englishman's Greek New Testament supplies an even stronger translation: "Satan demanded to have you.

It became clear that this event in the life of Simon Peter was more than a casual temptation. The testing of the fisherman from Galilee was planned by Satan, who repeated what was done with the patriarch Job (see Job 1:1-12). That the Devil demanded or asked excessively for this procedure indicated he was helpless until God gave the desired permission. Satan resembled a chained dog! His bark terrified many people, but there was a limit to his capabilities. God seemed to say,

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"so far, and no further." The Lord saw the end of Simon's struggle even before it commenced and permitted the temptation knowing he would be purified in the fires of affliction.

This should be a source of comfort to all who struggle against evil. It must be remembered that although Simon Peter lost that particular battle, he did not lose the war! The man who denied his Lord at the fire was invincible on the day of Pentecost. The coward who was terrorized by a girl's insinuation became God's spokesman to an immense multitude. The Lord knew what He was doing when He permitted Satan to attack the overconfident disciple. Unfortunately all Christians experience the agony of defeat and when ashamed of their conduct are tempted to abandon their work for the Lord. They forget that although God may have tears of disappointment in His eyes, the love in His heart never diminishes.

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The Compassionate Savior... "But I have prayed for thee"

Evidently Jesus knew Peter better than the disciple knew himself. Arrogant and self-confident, Simon resented the statement that he would disown his Master. He had always been worthy of trust and, whatever the other disciples did, he intended to remain faithful. His face set in firm strong lines and his jaw became more prominent. Jesus should exercise more care before suspecting a friend! Unfortunately Peter was a bold but temperamental man. The same spontaneous courage that enabled him to walk upon the Sea of Galilee disappeared when fear dominated his soul (see Matt. 14:28-31).

It was significant that the Lord never criticized His follower who prayed for him, and this was done secretly before Jesus spoke with His friend. Somewhere in the solitude, the Savior conversed with His Father and during the conversation said, "Hold him safely; do not let his faith falter." God assured His Son that all would be well; the tempestuous fisherman would survive another storm. That remarkable prayer invites scrutiny. The Master did not ask for the cessation of the trial, nor for any alleviation of the problem. He prayed for the strengthening of Peter's faith.

Jesus did not ask that the rough grindstone of testing would cease to turn; He desired that the sharp edge of the disciple's faith would be perfected. To produce that result, it was necessary that the wheels of destiny would play their part. It might be safe to assume that the Lord controlled the wheel and not Satan. The text suggests that although all the disciples were to become the targets of the evil one, Peter needed special assistance. Jesus said to Simon, "I have prayed for thee." During my pastorate in Wales, one of my elders was slow, deliberate, and utterly devoted. Each time he spoke in the Bible classes he said something! Other people spent a lot of time saying nothing! One day that aged saint said to me, "Pastor, I want you to pray for me, and I want you to tell the Lord that it is Edward Hopkins who needs help. Pray for me, please, and mention me by name. Tell the Lord you are asking about me." At that time I thought the old brother was a little self-centered; now I know he was wiser than his pastor.

The Condensed Supplication ... "that thy faith fail not"

The night was cold but the chilling winds could not soothe the pain in Simon's soul. He had disowned his Lord, broken his vows, and become a miserable hypocrite. The girl at the fire penetrated his defenses and the listening men had destroyed his self-respect. "And

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Peter went out, and wept bitterly" (Luke 22:62). The Lord's statement,

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"I have prayed for thee that thy faith fail not," was thought provoking. To what faith was Jesus referring? Did the Savior think of His disciple's faith in God? When a defeated man reminisces, sometimes he blames the Almighty for permitting the circumstances by which he was overcome. Some troubled souls, believing nothing remains for which to live, commit suicide. Perhaps Simon was so disgusted with himself he would have welcomed a chance to die.

Maybe the Lord was considering Peter's faith in the message that had brought him from the fishing boat. Perhaps disappointment, defeat, and disgust threatened to destroy Peter's future. Was the disciple in danger of jumping to a wrong conclusion? Even the darkest night ends with the dawn of a new day. "Simon, even failures can become stepping stones—do not lose your faith." Was the Lord concerned with the attitude of His follower? When a man loses self-respect, he can become a derelict. The Lord told a story about a prodigal son who became an outcast. The smell of a pig pen announced his presence, and when his pride died, the man's soul was in jeopardy. Hope was only renewed when his conscience became active. Perhaps the Lord prayed that Peter should not lose faith in himself. When a person abandons hope, little can be done for him. Simon was disgusted with his performance and reluctant to return to the disciples. That the Lord sent a special message to him did not change his attitude (see Mark 16:7). Later Jesus thought it necessary to speak with Peter privately (see Luke 24:34). What was said on that memorable occasion may never be known, but evidently a victory was won when Peter rejoined his brethren. Jesus was a channel through which His own prayer was answered. That fact should help everybody when God appears to be slow responding to requests.

The Confident Statement... "when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren"

Christ had more faith in Peter than the disciple had in himself. Simon only saw what had happened; Jesus saw what was yet to take place. It would be interesting to know the precise moment when the risen Savior appeared to Simon Peter (see Luke 24:34). Apparently, this was one of the first things He did after His resurrection. When the Emmaus travelers returned to Jerusalem to inform their friends of what they had heard and seen, the disciples were already aware of the Savior's meeting with Peter. The Lord was anxious to confront the despondent follower

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and realized that delay might be dangerous. That meeting was high on His list of priorities.

It is stimulating to remember that Jesus knew His friend would respond and believed Peter would become a greater man than he was prior to his denial. Evidently, even in those tragic moments when Simon was denying his Lord, God was making all things work together for the good of His servant (see Rom. 8:28). The hands of the divine Potter were already beginning to transform a marred vessel so that it would be of greater service within the kingdom of God. The other disciples were also weak, and a part of Peter's ministry would be the strengthening of his colleagues. It is difficult to associate the tragedy of Simon's denial with his courageous preaching on the day of Pentecost. Furthermore, his subsequent ministry and the writing of two epistles bear testimony to the sincerity of his rededication. Simon Peter never repeated his mistake, and after two thousand years of church history, his name is honored among countless Christians. All believers admire the great fisherman, for in him they see a portrait of themselves. When the apostle met people who insisted they were unworthy of following Christ, Peter would say: "Let me tell you what happened to me.

Probably the writer to the Hebrews knew Simon personally, and

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the possibility exists that when he wrote about Christ's ability to save to the uttermost, he was thinking about the apostle. A hypothetical question may be asked: What would have happened to Peter had the Lord not prayed for him? Speculation could provide varying answers but the best would be the same as would happen to us! We could be empty, dirty, useless, and unfit for habitation by the Spirit of God.

Joyce Kilmer wrote entrancing lines that express those sentiments. He described an old farmhouse that was close to his home.

Whenever I walk to Suffern,
Along the Erie track,
I go by a poor old farmhouse,
With its shingles broken and black.
I suppose I've passed it a hundred times,
But I always stop for a minute,
And look at that house, the tragic house;
The house with nobody in it.
I've never seen a haunted house,
But I hear there are such things,

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That they hold the talk of spirits,
Their mirth and sorrowings.
I know this house isn't haunted,
But I wish it were, I do,
For it wouldn't be so lonely,
If it had a spirit or two.

If I had a lot of money,
And all my debts were paid,
I'd put a gang of men to work,
With brush, and saw, and spade.
I'd buy that place,
And I'd fix it up, the way it used to be:
And I'd find some people who wanted a home,
And I'd give it to them, free.

So whenever I go to Suffern,
Along the Erie track,
I never go by that empty house,
Without stopping and looking back.
It hurts me to look at the crumbling roof
And the shutters falling apart,
For I can't help thinking the poor old house
Is a house with a broken heart.

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