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LaD 389 on preached by Mr. J. Delves at "Ebenezer" Clapham on Sunday morning 5th. March, 1972.

Hymns: 180, 380, 305

Reading: Luke 22 (28-62)

Text: Luke 22, 31, 32

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"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".

The chapter has some very important matters recorded concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, His disciples, Peter, Judas and other things, which can be a warning to us against a vain unjustifiable confidence such as some people may have until trials come to test it. There are also timely encouragements to the Lord's people who are tried lest they should fall away and prove at last like those who went no more with Him. The case of Peter has certain striking points for he was what we might term a character on his own; but he was a true disciple who loved his Lord and he had to prove he could not stand in his own strength, and neither can any of us. He was not in a safe place when he said that he would go to prison and to death with his Lord, although he may have been quite sincere and thought he could; but he had to prove that he could not stand in his own strength.

In these two verses we have the Lord's word to Peter, particularly, although evidently in the hearing of the other disciples to whom the Lord had been speaking. But here evidently He addresses Peter, - "Simon", not "Peter" indicating stability and strength, but "Simon, Simon, behold", (indicating that He had something outstanding to tell Simon and so indeed He had) - "Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat". This was a very solemn, searching prediction of his fall; and what very, very soon transpired, but even so the Lord said, "But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not". Neither did his faith fail; but his courage and his natural confidence failed to an awfully sad degree; but he was mercifully restored, brought back again; and here is an injunction, the Lord knowing that it would be so

said, "and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren".

I would desire to speak first of all of this particular point, of Satan's desire - "Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat". This matter of having a desire we find the Lord Jesus Himself gave expression to in verse 15 when He said unto them, "With desire have I desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer". This was the Saviour's desire which was fulfilled, this was a holy desire, a desire that not only He might eat of the passover and institute the ordinance of the Lord's supper, but incorporate in it all that is in the sign, or the shadow, figure or emblem, as relating to His sufferings. Satan's desire was as opposite as could possibly be, as opposite as heaven from hell, light from darkness, good from evil. In the case of Satan it was a desire which it was impossible for him to fully accomplish. It may be a mystery to some that we read of this implacable enemy as a person in the Scriptures. The Lord referring to him states that he was cast out of heaven. This is more than we can understand, but it was absolutely true of him; as a spirit he fell, was cast out of Paradise in consequence, and he has never re-entered, and never will. The Apostle Peter, referring to him, speaks of him being cast down to hell. He is referred to in the Scriptures as being the "prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience", and we have not far to go to observe this power that he has over men; but he has no power over the Lord's people to destroy them, although he does tempt them. He tempted Christ, but without any success whatever. This awful, implacable, inveterate enemy, the devil, (as often he is termed), from the very time he was cast out of heaven manifested his enmity and bitterness against Christ and His people; and we soon have to see how he succeeded in deceiving, by causing our first parents to violate the command that was laid upon them with its awful, terrible consequences that continue to this present day. He is an awful, terrible reality, but mercifully, as concerning the Lord's people, his power is limited by the Lord; otherwise we should be completely overcome. Mercifully for us there is a

higher power than any Satanic power holding and preserving those for whom the Saviour bled and died. It is clear that his power is limited, for as we read in the case of Job, he brought up that wicked calumny against Job as though he were merely a hypocrite, the Lord gave him sufferance to try Job and he made use of it to the very last degree; but he was only allowed to go so far and no further. It was a limited power by which he was for certain reasons permitted to afflict the Lord's servant Job, and he went as far as he dare; but his desire was not fulfilled concerning Job. I suppose it could be said truthfully that it is Satan's desire to have all the Lord's people; and if it were in his power he would drag us all down to endless perdition and the bottomless pit in chains of darkness for ever. Mercifully, there is a higher power than the devil's power and that is our hope. Often, it may be, there are sharp and fiery temptations which seize us, but it is a divine power that preserves, holds and keeps us. It might be wholesome to consider the fact that he dared to tempt Christ, as you know, but although he tried this way, and that way yet he failed every time. There was undoubtedly a purpose in this in relation to the Lord's divine intercession, and His sympathy with His poor tempted people. The Apostle says that, "He was in all points tempted like as we are yet without sin". Being Himself tempted; and knowing what temptation means, and that being more painful to Him than to a sinful person, He is able to succour His poor, tried, tempted followers. Satan is a tempter and a very lively one, a very subtle one, he can be an angel of light, or he can be a roaring lion, he can puff one up with pride, or drive one near to despair, but it is a desire, he cannot accomplish his designs as he would because his power is limited by the Lord.

"Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat". This then, as a figure of speech, indicated that Peter would be put to a severe testing, he would be sifted as wheat. As you know after the corn is cut there has to be what is termed the threshing. In the old days the corn was spread out upon the floor and beaten with a flail, to separate the grain, the corn,

the wheat, from the chaff. Satan's motive was to prove that there was nothing more than chaff after the wheat is sifted. After the grain is separated from the wheat there is nothing but the chaff left, and this indicates in the figure a severe testing and undoubtedly many, many of the Lord's people have known something of this in their own experience. I would not doubt that some of you have. Those that are quickened into life and are brought to follow their Lord will find it to be a path of tribulation more or less, and this being sifted as wheat, is like to a severe trial of faith, certain things coming upon one or what one may feel within. These can sometimes be very conflicting things, things we cannot understand, that confound our poor reason; and Satan exploits them to the greatest advantage possible, and he has brought some of the Lord's dear children to a state of distraction and near to despair. He may sift them as wheat to attempt to prove to them that they are nothing more than hypocrites, and that there is nothing real in religion after all, and a hundred other things besides. Every vessel of mercy has to pass through a sifting time. We have to be sifted as wheat, there has to be a separating of the precious from the vile. There will be this sifting time. Was it not like this with the good prophet who had some solemn view of the majesty of God and said, "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips". In this experience he had such a view of himself as he had never had before.

Many of the Lord's dear people have passed through painful and afflictive providences, some of these have been like to being sifted as wheat and they have said as did Jacob, "All these things are against me". Did he not feel to have come to the end so to speak when all appeared to be against him. So they appear to have been sometimes with you; as though they all conspire together for your overthrow, and you have felt quite unable to stand against them. This is like being sifted as wheat, but this is Satan exploiting the afflicting experiences of the Lord's people. In the case of Jacob it was certainly true that all appeared to be against him. So it was with David; he came to a place when he said

under those persecutions, I shall one day fall by the hand of Saul, he will kill me. His Psalms indicate something of this sifting, as when he said, "O my God my soul is cast down within me", with many other similar sentences. There has to be a sifting time, but although Satan may be permitted to tempt, try and afflict the Lord's people, yet it can never be more than a desire to accomplish what he is not permitted by God to do. "Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat".

This is one point then as relating more particularly to the conflict, temptation, inward battles, fears, sinkings, and sometimes inward revolting, rebellion and fretfulness of the Lord's people. There is a constant warfare, "Satan hath desired to have you that he may sift you as wheat". But it is only a desire. Satan was permitted to sift Peter as wheat, for the time soon came when he denied his Lord as we have been reading; he denied Him and affirmed that he did not know Him, and he repeated it. "I know not the Man", he said. This was a complete failure of all that was natural in Peter, but it was not the same as it was with Judas who sought opportunity to betray Him. There is a secret behind this in Peter's case and that is my second point in the subject here, "I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not".

We must take this as it stands here that Peter's faith did not fail, but his natural confidence, his boasting, such as "I will go to prison and death with Thee Lord, I will never leave Thee, I will die with Thee", but a severe blow came upon this in a short space of time. I would say that Peter quite meant what he said at the time, but he had to prove that he could not accomplish these things in his own strength, and very soon He denied Him, as we have been reading, which was an awfully sad fall. Even so there is something very encouraging in the issue, not as far as Peter was concerned himself, but on the part of the Lord Jesus Christ praying on his behalf, "I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not". It was not his faith that failed then but everything natural failed and yet notwithstanding all faith was preserved for the Lord said, "I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not".

There is something very sweet about this. We find that there were cases where the Lord prayed for particular persons. This was

so in the days of His flesh, when He was here upon earth and it is so today. When the Lord Jesus was here upon earth He prayed as a praying man and we have that wonderful prayer in the 17th. John. Poor Peter was not outside that prayer, he was incorporated in the Lord's prayer for all His people. "I pray for them". Perhaps you say I have tried to pray for years yet still seem where I was before; but you cannot give up can you, for some reason you must keep praying. What is the real secret of this? I believe the secret is this, "I have prayed for thee". It is the prayer of Christ for you that keeps you praying, this holds you up and keeps you from despair, from going back into the world, or falling to rise no more. This is a divine power that holds the Lord's people on in the midst of afflictions, trials, burdens and difficulties, although they may not at the time realise the great and blessed secret. "I have prayed for thee". If this is really true of us, that the Lord Jesus has prayed for us and does pray for us, then we shall overcome at last; because for the devil to overcome one for whom Christ prays he must overcome Christ.

"I have prayed for thee". How sweet this can be in the heart sometimes with the Lord's poor afflicted people, and does not that continue; I believe it does. The Apostle Paul refers to the Lord Jesus Christ ascending up into heaven and states that He ever liveth to make intercession for us. "I have prayed for thee" - this will bear you up and keep you from falling utterly, and though there may be some sad inward falls, this will support us in the furnace of trial and affliction. This can be a very sweet thought in the heart of one, "I have prayed for thee that thy faith fail not". Faith is tried, there is a sifting and sometimes a severe testing, but what is underneath it all? This great secret, "I have prayed for thee that thy faith fail not".

Then there is a third point, "When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren". The Lord could clearly foresee the issue of everything concerning Peter's future. It was a sad, sad fall, but it does not become us to say we shall never fall,

we will go to prison or to death; no, we are far safer on our knees praying, "Lord help me". We read of the Lord Jesus in a hymn:

"With cries and tears he offered up
His humble suit below;
But with authority he asks,
Enthroned in glory now."

This is where our strength lies. Here was a word to Peter, "When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren". When was Peter converted? In the last verse that I read this morning, "And Peter went out and wept bitterly", that is when he was converted. To be converted means to be turned round, or brought back. This must be distinct from the new birth, although it is closely connected. The new birth consists in life given, but conversion means a person being turned round so to speak to pursue a course or path he has never walked in before, this is the case with everyone that is born again, for before, they were going the broad way to destruction, but this conversion means that they are turned round, taken out of the broad way, to strive to enter in at the strait gate. There is something very sweet about this matter of Peter going out and weeping bitterly. It was a penetrating look when the Lord turned and looked upon him; it seemed shall I say to go right through him. "And Peter went out and wept bitterly". He was converted, brought back, restored, turned right back from his former sad condition.

"When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren", and this Peter did as you know. Peter was still Peter after the resurrection. Peter was usually one of the foremost to speak. In the first chapter of Acts we read that Peter was the spokesman when the company were gathered together and it was necessary to appoint another deacon; and Peter strengthened his brethren on the day of Pentecost. He strengthened his brethren, that is his fellow disciples; and his epistles have been a means of strengthening thousands and thousands of the Lord's poor, tempted people when they have had to walk in a path of suffering and affliction. How kindly and tenderly he speaks in his epistles to the Lord's persecuted, suffering people. There was no more

self-boasting, but very tender words when he was writing those epistles to the scattered tribes; he was strengthening his brethren in the faith and hope of the Gospel. This is one feature of the Gospel ministry, as well as the call by the Gospel in the hearts of unconverted ones. "Strengthen thy brethren". May there not be just this, that in our poor little way it is good if we can strengthen each other and encourage each other in our exercises, trials, afflictions, difficulties and crosses. May the Lord help us then. It is a mercy to be exercised, but it is very confirming when sometimes those exercises can be related to others; thus we can strengthen our brethren. "When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren". Amen.