

# Simon Peter— Sifted and Converted

*“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

## **IT IS CONJECTURAL JUST**

how much Simon Peter understood related to the coming suffering and death of his beloved Lord prior to the consummation of the event. It is supposable, however, that following the rebuke by Jesus as recorded in Matthew 16:22,23—the result of Peter’s attempt to advise Jesus against entering Jerusalem to suffer and die at

the hands of the Jewish religious leaders—he had thought upon the matter and had some forebodings of the tragic event coming to pass in the near future.

Peter could not understand why Jesus, whom he believed to be the Messiah of God, so long looked for, with the authority and power to render himself

invulnerable to attack by mortal man, should allow himself to become a victim of the hate and jealousy of the religious rulers and die at their hands. Self-preservation is the first law of the natural man, and in Peter's thinking there existed no allowance for weakness or servility, especially on the part of kings, of whom he recognized Jesus to be the chief. Rugged and courageous himself, full of initiative, Peter envisioned continued progress toward the subjugation of Israel to the Master's will, and his own position as an associate in the new administration of this greatest of all kings.

No doubt in this frame of mind, he must have been puzzled and troubled by the occasional references Jesus mentioned of his coming suffering and death. Being a natural man, Peter comprehended nothing of the philosophy of the ransom as of yet. To earthly minded Jews of Peter's day it was a stumbling block, and to natural minded Gentiles, foolishness. (I Cor. 1:23) Imagine the contemplations of so ardent and impetuous a person as the Bible discloses Peter to have been, relative to the course he would pursue in the event of any physical violence taken against his beloved Master. Peter knew Jesus to be inoffensive, his words sweet, and loving—one "altogether lovely." (Song of Sol. 5:16; Luke 4:22) He was endowed with wisdom above any other person of his day, hence not one deserving punishment.—Mark 6:2; Luke 2:40,52

Sincere and wholehearted, Peter avowed his devotion to the Lord. (Matt. 26:33,35) To him Jesus was worthy of this from any man. It would be only natural for him to resent any suggestion of insult or offense to the Master, and no doubt he felt called

upon to act as his protector and bodyguard. The fact that he was so close to the Lord, and on all important occasions accompanied him, probably confirmed Peter's belief that he should regard himself as Jesus' special protector.

One can readily see that the Lord's pointed references to the coming tragedy would beget in Peter a determination to be on his guard. Thus when Jesus agreed to the disciples' suggestion of taking weapons of defense to the Mount of Olives, it was Peter who had one of the two swords. (Luke 22:38) His sword, likely a common form of knife used for killing animals, was probably far from the large, keen-edged weapons carried by the Romans. Nevertheless, it was doubtless well sharpened and polished, and with it Peter could imagine excellent usefulness at close range.

### **“YE SHALL BE OFFENDED”**

Peter, as well as the other disciples, must have been shocked at Jesus' assertion that one of the twelve would betray him, and that they all would be offended because of him that night. The record states: “Then saith Jesus unto them, All ye shall be offended [Greek: stumbled] because of me this night: for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad.”—Matt. 26:31; Zech. 13:7

Peter, with unbounded confidence in the impossibility of any wrongdoing on the Lord's part, and sure of his own fidelity and loyalty to the one whom he considered his best friend on earth, made it definite and plain that although it might be possible for all others to be offended, yet he would remain loyal to the very end. (Matt. 26:33) Alas, how little

did he then realize his own deficiency! However, the Lord knew him better than he knew himself. Perhaps it was the unexpected, sudden turn of events that took Peter by surprise and temporarily overwhelmed him. That their acclaimed Master and the future ruler of the earth should be subjected to such indignity seemed unthinkable, no doubt.

Jesus' understanding was perfect. Peter, without the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, was devoid of the meaning or the necessity of sacrifice, especially of one so close to God. Sufficient it was to impress upon Peter the one basic idea that his Master must die, and intended to die. There was a reason for it, a purpose in it, but his disciples were first to be tested and tried as to their loyalty to him before the reason for these seeming difficulties would be made apparent to them.

Is it not often just so with us as we progress in our quest for the clear light of God's Word and counsel? Perhaps we have not always seen the necessity for maintaining an uncompromising attitude toward the forces of evil and their baneful influence, but as we come to see the righteousness of God as our standard, we become convinced that nothing short of this should be paramount in our lives. Thus we are being led by his grace from one stage to another in the path of life and glory.—II Pet. 3:18

## **LACK OF UNDERSTANDING**

One wonders at Peter's lack of understanding of the imperfect human nature. Being honest and sincere himself, no doubt he regarded others as honest and sincere as well. Therefore it would be

inconceivable to him that anyone professing such high regard for Jesus as to become his follower could ever betray him. However, the Lord knew that Judas was a thief and a traitor. (John 6:64; 13:26,27) No doubt had Peter known it, he would have taken steps to prevent Judas from carrying out his designs to betray and deliver the Lord. Yet, regardless of the distinct hint dropped by Jesus relative to the imminence of the coming tragedy and the part Judas was to play in it, Peter lacked vigilance and was sound asleep at his post at a time when, as a bodyguard and protector, he should have been most watchful.—Matt. 26:40-46

Peter was in for a very sad awakening that momentous night of our Lord's betrayal and arrest. It is possible that even then the arousing of his suspicions of foul play was delayed by Judas' leadership of the crowd. However, the Lord's words and the sight of so great and antagonistic a company armed with "swords and staves," brought to him a realization of the correct state of things. (Matt. 26:55) He saw, with a rising burst of fury, that the war was on. When the servant of the high priest rushed forward and attempted to seize Jesus, thus placing himself in the dangerous position of an enemy, for which Peter was prepared and armed, it was only natural for Peter to resort to violence. The servant lost an ear only, which was a most remarkable piece of good fortune for him. No doubt Peter's intention was to deliver a telling and fatal blow. Certainly the event was divinely overruled.—John 18:10,11; Luke 22:49-51

## **DIVINE POWER AVAILABLE**

Always with his chief object in mind, Jesus then, amid all the excitement, explained to the inflamed Peter, not only the futility, but the inadmissibility of the use of the sword. He also stressed the fact that the entire sequence of events was with his permission and foreknowledge, and that he could obtain help and protection from the angelic hosts. Adding significantly for Peter's future consideration, Jesus explained that this drama was the fulfillment of scripture and therefore must be carried out.—Matt. 26:52-54

Obediently, Peter sheathed his sword. He had come prepared to fight, was in the mood to fight, and in his zeal felt equal to the situation. All he wanted and needed was the Lord's permission, though the record does not indicate that he asked for it. Perhaps the Lord's healing of the servant of the high priest, as well as his rebuke of Peter, lay at the forefront of Peter's mental and spiritual troubles that terrible night and the days to follow. He was no doubt puzzled and most disappointed.

The other apostles had deserted both him and the Lord. Peter, however, laboring under much pressure, was determined to follow Jesus and his apprehenders to the high priest's palace. In this he may have been placing himself in a position where he might, if opportunity presented, lend a hand in helping Jesus to escape. It was here that his most severe test came, and he fell before the pressure of public opinion. Had he so soon forgotten those avowals of fidelity to his Master? He had not forgotten them; his heart was right before God, but his mental process and the weakness of the flesh were not equal to the

occasion. Under the pressure of those trying hours, and without the indwelling of God's Holy Spirit to sustain him, he faltered, and disavowed the Lord who had come to give his life in sacrifice for him and for all people.

The account reads: "Peter followed him at a distance, to the palace of the high priest; and having entered, sat with the attendants to see the result." (Matt. 26:58, *The Emphatic Diaglott*) It is doubtful that Peter even yet understood the gravity of the situation. That the Lord was in a precarious place was obvious to him. His reasoning, however, perhaps included the idea that Jesus could, if he would, use divine power to escape his captors' apparently well-laid plans to do away with him. Peter would then be somewhere close by, ready for any call for help that might come. No call for assistance came from the Master nor from anyone else. No doubt this too was upsetting and trying to the natural disposition of Peter, who ordinarily was a man of action and deeds as well as of words. Now, all he could do was sit and wait.

## **PETER DENIES**

The unfortunate observation of the court maid that Peter was one of Jesus' friends placed him in an awkward position. (Matt. 26:69) Above all it was important to his strategy not to be recognized. To be identified as a personal friend of the prisoner would handicap him in any effort he might make to render aid to the Master. It was not necessarily fear, nor shame of the Lord, that prompted him to deny his relationship to his beloved; but it could have been a natural impulse to preserve whatever

advantage might accrue to him by remaining unknown and ostensibly disinterested.

Without the slightest hesitation and seemingly without a qualm of conscience, he declared that he did not know Jesus. (vs. 70) Although he felt considerably relieved when the maid passed on, he thought it best to make a change of location, perhaps to a less conspicuous spot. Quietly he arose and made his way to the outside porch, standing in the shadows, watching and waiting. He was soon detected, however, and another woman openly accused him of his former fellowship with Jesus. Again Peter denied it. —vss. 71,72

Now the situation was becoming increasingly critical, and fear for his friend was striking at Peter's stout heart. Perhaps by now, under the stress of excitement he recalled the former words of the Lord that he must suffer and die at the hands of the Jewish leaders. Desperately, he cast about in an effort to decide on a course of action. Any attempt to rush the palace single-handedly, if this had been his plan, had by now become obviously futile. How gladly would he have welcomed an opportunity to rush to the assistance of his friend, even to die by his side, for he was sincere in declaring his willingness to do so. Yet now it was as though Peter was bound, shackled and fettered with helplessness.

Then others approached him: "You were one of them," they insisted. Poor, despairing Peter! His efforts having proved unavailing, he saw himself helpless, ineffective as a man of stone such as his name implied, while not a dozen yards away the Messiah of God stood condemned in the midst of his enemies, without a friend or hope of escape.



With passion Peter gave way to his despair, even to the extent of cursing and shouting back at his accusers, "I do not know the man!"—Matt. 26:73,74

## **THE COCK CROWS**

We have here the marvelous understanding of the perfect man, Jesus. How did he know that Peter would deny him, yet later prove such a bulwark to the Early Church? It is certain that he knew Peter would be at the palace; and who can doubt that he knew his faithful apostle desired to be there in his Master's time of need? That Peter would be recognized Jesus could also be certain; and that Peter's natural disposition would lead to his denial he was also able to understand. Imperfect Peter could not, of course, trace the steps leading to his denial of the Lord. However, the Lord's perfect mind traced them, so much that he had even warned Peter in advance that he would deny him three times.

It was the early morning crowing of a common barnyard fowl that abruptly brought Peter back to mental equilibrium. We can be sure that the great Jehovah overruled in the interest of Peter's mental state. As his passions subsided, his reason returned. With clearer vision he grasped that Jesus had traced it all, had foreseen the effort he would make, would know of his mental reactions, and consequent failures, and had forewarned him of them. It was only with the foretold crowing of a fowl that Peter awoke to the true situation with its resultant remorse. Yet, it was this comprehension that steadied him during the days to follow.—vss. 74,75

## **JESUS' DEATH NECESSARY**

One thing was now becoming plain: it was necessary that Jesus should die, even though Peter found himself unable to understand why. The Lord had foreknown it, and had foretold it. It was for this reason that Peter's efforts had proved unavailing from the beginning. He had tried, but had accomplished nothing. Willing, but powerless, he had presented himself in a last desperate effort to save the Savior of men. He had acted without understanding, and his efforts had involved him in the extremity of having denied his Lord.

The following three days were difficult ones for Peter and the rest of the apostles. What could they do now that their leader and deliverer had been so humiliatingly killed? We can readily understand how they must have felt at this sudden, and to them, unexpected turn of events. Perhaps as they all talked the matter over, the words of the Lord returned to them, and they measurably realized that as it was written, so it was necessary, known and ordered of God, that the apparently awful tragedy should take place. (Matt. 16:21; 17:22,23; 20:17-19; 26:2) However, as Peter contemplated the masterful Jesus humbly and meekly submitting to the violent subjugation of his rights, even to the point of allowing himself to be led "as a lamb to the slaughter," he was filled with confusion and great disappointment. —Isa. 53:7

Peter had believed Jesus to be the conqueror and king of the world. Jesus, to be sure, had been gentle and friendly; but Peter knew that he possessed miraculous power, not only to heal all manner of disease, but even to direct the elements and the

laws which ordinarily controlled those elements. He had seen with his own eyes this power exercised on more than one occasion. Peter was not by any means willing to attribute to his Master either cowardice or lack of courage, but he was painfully aware that Jesus had not stood up for himself and assert his rights. Peter probably felt deeply perplexed as he thought upon these things.

How much of those three days Peter spent with the other disciples we do not know, but he was with some of them on the first day of the week when the women returned from the sepulcher bringing an excited account of strange occurrences. From that day forward the fact of the Lord's resurrection was thoroughly verified and established. (Matt. 28:1-10; John 20:1-20) To say that Peter was overjoyed at the resurrection of Jesus would be to state it mildly. However, there seemed to be a difference in the resurrected Jesus and the one with whom he had enjoyed such blissful fellowship before the dismal days beginning three days previous. Though he knew the Lord to be the same Jesus, and still loved him, Peter seemed to have lost some of his former self-confidence and that intense zeal for the cause to which he had been called and chosen by the Master.

## **RETURN TO FISHING**

As the days passed, Peter and a number of the other disciples evidently decided to return to their former occupation, the fishing business. Little had been seen or heard from their Lord for some time. Breezes blew in from the sea laden with the refreshing smell of water and vegetation, perhaps stirring

up past memories and old impulses. Not knowing what other course of action to take, Peter turned to his boat and to his fishing.—John 21:1-3

This set the stage for a very convincing miracle which led up to the friendly dialog between Peter and his Master, which finally broke down the last barrier existing between them. It was a friendly little gathering by the campfire on the seashore that morning. The fire had warmed them, the food had refreshed them, and the majestic presence of the risen Lord had filled them with peace and quiet joy. (vss. 4-14) This quiet, peaceful setting was the occasion for another of those same heart-to-heart talks which they had enjoyed with Jesus so many times in the past. At the conclusion of this interesting incident the Lord once more directed his attention to Peter, and once more desired to confirm the faith and love of this zealous disciple; for had not Satan sought to sift him as wheat?—Luke 22:31,32

Jesus, the understanding one, realized the besetting sin and weakness of this otherwise strong character. As steel is tempered in the fiery furnace, so Peter had been severely tried. He needed yet to be tempered before he was qualified for his apostolic mission, so Jesus besought him with the question, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?"—John 21:15

Peter's answer was in the affirmative: "Yea, Lord, thou knowest that I love thee," but it seemed to lack the apostle's former depth of devotion to his Master. After a while the Lord again spoke to Peter, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?" This must have caused Peter considerable distress of heart. Indeed, he loved the Lord, had always loved the

Lord, and said so, but Jesus had still questioned him a second time.—John 21:16

The Master's commission to feed his lambs and feed his sheep must have constituted a source of hope to Peter. It implied future service for the Lord, and fellowship with those whom the Lord regarded as his own. This in itself proved a softening influence. The Lord again approached Peter a third time: "Simon, son of Jonas," Jesus asked the third and final time, "Lovest thou me?"—vs. 17

Peter was grieved—godly sorrow had mellowed the soul. (II Cor. 7:10) His heart was now in a proper receptive attitude. No doubt the Master's asking the question three times reminded Peter of his three denials. If Peter had this in mind, it must have brought home his mistakes and the realization of his absolute dependence upon divine grace and help in every time of trial, with less and less dependence upon self and the arm of flesh. All pride and chagrin faded away. Self-will and opposition to his Lord and to his plan gave way forever to love and complete self-denial. Probably tears filled his eyes. Smiling through them he finally affirmed with enthusiasm, "Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee." As if to assure Peter that he did indeed know that his heart was true, and that there was yet a great work for him to do, Jesus again replied, "Feed my sheep."

## **EPILOGUE**

By the Lord's grace and with his help, Peter's sifting "as wheat" was accomplished. It resulted in his being used greatly in the establishment and growth of the Early Church, first for Jewish believers on

the Day of Pentecost, and later for Gentiles through his ministry to Cornelius and his household. (Acts 2:1-4,14-36; 10:1-45) Still later, this beloved apostle wrote two noteworthy epistles to both Jewish and Gentile “strangers scattered” throughout various parts of Asia.—I Pet. 1:1

The many lessons Peter had learned during his time of sifting served him well. He exhorted and admonished the brethren, and us today, along many of the same lines—faith, humility, response to trial, and the development of the graces of the spirit. In his final recorded words, he left us both a warning and encouragement: “Beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own stedfastness. But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen.”—II Pet. 3:17,18

