

Standing In the Gap

TEXT: *"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers. "Peter said to him, "Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death." Jesus said, "I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me." (Luke 22: 31-34 ESV)*

I. INTRODUCTION:

A. **John Kenney, pastor at First Reformed Church** in Grand Haven, Michigan – his anecdote about his experience as a chaplain in the U.S. Army.

1. One of his responsibilities as a chaplain was to counsel soldiers who tried to get out of deployment. His role was to help them see that what they were doing was honorable and that was a privilege to serve their country.
 - a) They had many excuses as to why it was justified:
 - (1) Their recruiter had not told them this would happen.
 - (2) They were told that they could get out of this if they had a good excuse.
 - (3) They suffered terribly in hot climates.
 - (4) And so the excuses continued.
 - b) They wanted all the benefits of being in the U.S. Army.
 - c) They loved the experience of "playing soldier."
 - d) They enjoyed being in good condition.

2. **THEY WANTED ALL THE BENEFITS, BUT THEY DID NOT WANT TO PAY THE PRICE!**

II. THE CHURCH DESCRIBED

A. **There are many metaphors for the church used in the New Testament:**

1. A family (2 Corinthians 6:18)
2. A body (1 Corinthians 12:24-25, 27)
3. A kingdom (Philippians 3:20)
4. A flock (John 10:4)
5. A house (1 Peter 2:5)
6. A vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16)
7. A Pearl (Matthews 12:45-46)
8. A candlestick (Matthew 5:14-16)

9. An army (1 Corinthians 10:3-4; 1 Timothy 2:3; Ephesians 6:10-

B. Generally, however the New Testament describes the church in -- three ways:

1. A Body
2. A Family, and...
3. **An Army – and I want to focus on this description today.**
 - a) Certainly **the church is “at war”** with the forces of evil. But the warfare is not a carnal warfare with planes, tanks, guns and bombs. Paul wrote to Christians in **Corinth,** *“for though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds.”* (2 Corinthians 10:3-4)
 - b) He urged **Timothy** to *“share in the suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him.”* (2 Timothy 2:3-4)
 - c) And he wrote to the **Ephesians** exhorting them to *“put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”* (Ephesians 6:11-12)
 - d) **Jesus** tells us, **“I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against her.”** (Matthew 16:18)
 - (1) I find it strange that many people read this passage and take a **defensive view** of the work of the church.
 - (2) However this is not a picture of the church on the defensive!
 - (3) What is the **purpose of gates**? Are they an offensive weapon for a defense?
 - (4) Of course, they are defensive.
 - (5) This is a picture of **the church on the offense.** The church is aggressively attacking!
 - (6) The devil and his army are hiding behind these gates and the church, with its gospel battering rams, is attacking that gate.

III. HERE IS A FUNDAMENTAL TRUTH: WE ARE ENGAGED IN AN EPIC BATTLE.

- A. We have an **enemy** and his name is **Satan**.
1. Satan, or the devil, is a created being.
 - a) He is not greater than nor equal with God
 - b) However, he is more powerful and wiser than man.
 2. Satan existed before time began.
 - a) He was among the highest created angelic beings. Originally he was called **Lucifer, Son of the Morning**.
 - b) He was filled with pride in his own heart and was cast out of Heaven, taking with him one-third of the angels (See Isaiah 14:12-15 and Revelation 12:4.)
 - c) Disobedient angels fell from their high, holy position and **became demonic**.
- B. Because God pronounced judgment upon Satan, **he hates God** and seeks to strike at Him in every way that he possibly can.
1. However, since Satan is a created being, **he can only do what God allows**.
 2. And only for a **temporary period** of time.
 3. Who among you has never felt the heat of that attack?
- C. The **Bible describes Satan** in many ways:
1. He is the **Accuser**. He is ready and willing at all times to remind us of all our sins, our errors, our failures and our continual shortcomings.
 2. He is described as a **“Roaring Lion”** by Peter. He is always seeking someone who is weak and on the fringes to take down in order to devour them.
 3. He is described as a **Serpent** (Genesis 3). He is sneaky, sly, conniving and underhanded. There is no “fairness” in him as he does battle with us.
 4. He is a **Liar**. In John’s gospel chapter 8, Jesus describes Satan accurately as a liar and a murderer.
 5. And by the way, Satan also makes supplication:
 - a) **“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you...”**
 - (1) Whom did Satan ask? There is no one he could ask but God himself.
 - (2) This very naturally begs the question, **why did God not simply say “no.”**? Hold on to that thought and we’ll talk about it later.
- D. This is the **nature of the leader of our enemy** and, as in any battle,

there are the wounded and casualties.

- E. **We are in the Lord's army.** We fight under God's banner and our leader is Lord Jesus.
- F. And yet, as I mentioned earlier, too often while **we Christians want the benefits, we often don't want the battle.**

IV. SATAN PREYS ON LEADERS

A. As in any battle, Satan goes first after the leaders.

1. Jesus of course knows this and he also knows that the leaders will have the biggest targets on their back in this battle.
2. Let's take a look at our text again:
 - a) Jesus tells Peter, Satan has requested the authority to **"sift you like wheat."**
 - b) We don't do much "wheat sifting" in this day and age. We have no reason to know that it involves an extremely physical and violent action to separate the wheat from the chaff.
 - c) So **Jesus first points out** that Satan is requested to have Peter (you is singular).
 - d) However he is also requested to have ALL the disciples
 - e) This passage would be much easier if the English translation of the Greek read like "southerneze" **"Satan has demanded to have you (Peter) but I have prayed for y'all."**

C. There are ample examples of Satan's effectiveness.

1. The number of church leaders who have gone down in flames are legion.
 - a) Pastors fall under sexual sin.
 - b) Pastors fall under failures of doubt.
 - c) Pastors fall under the weight of dishonesty, etc.
 - d) Even as you're sitting there, you are very probably thinking of examples you know about personally where Satan has taken down pastors and leaders.
2. The **world delights in this.**
 - a) News stories love to focus on the failures of pastors and to point out those failures.
 - b) It is clear the world delights when they can point to Christian pastors and leaders and say, "see, they are no different than we are." Or, "I always knew Christians were hypocrites."

3. When Satan asks to **“sift them like wheat,”** he wants to grind them down – **he doesn’t want to kill them.**
 - a) He wants to separate them from God.
 - b) He wants to **make them ineffective** and then leave them in a **position of responsibility.**
 - c) This is not new; remember Job.

D. What are Satan’s methods?

1. He **deceives in private:**
 - a) He began to pervert Eve in a private conversation.
 - b) He spoke with her first and used her to pervert Adam.

2. He is a **master of subtlety.**
 - a) He knows it every good lie begins with a grain of truth.
 - b) He assures you that you can get away with that.
 - c) He asks us as he asked Eve, “Did God actually say, **“You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?”**
 - (1) **Of course, God never said that.**
 - (2) When Eve corrects him and says **“you shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.”** Satan says **“you will not surely die.”**

3. Once you have **bought in,** he then brings **public disgrace** to the pastor or leader and to the church.

4. How does it end? **It ends in destruction.**
 - a) Families are destroyed
 - b) Churches are split
 - c) The world has its next opportunity to point out what “hypocrites” Christians actually are.
 - d) It gives more license to the scoffer and the mocker.

V. AS SURELY AS SATAN PREYS ON LEADERS, JESUS PRAYS FOR LEADERS

- A. Hebrews 17: 25, **“Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.”**

- B. Jesus does not pray for the **absence of trials** – he doesn’t say, “God said yes, but I say no.”
 1. Jesus never prays in opposition to the will of his Father.
 2. Jesus never wishes the trial away because he knows his Father has purposed it.

- C. Instead, Jesus says **“but I prayed for you that your faith might not fail.”** In other words, I **WILL pray** for grace to strengthen you. (Luke 22:31)
1. Peter **YOU** will fail....
 2. My apostles, **YOU** will fail....
 3. Subsequently, **Peter denies Jesus three times** and leaves the compound at a run and in tears – a broken man.
 4. **All flee** after the event in Caiaphas’s compound.
- D. Jesus knew Peter would fail, but his prayer was more than sufficient and he knew Peter and the disciples would ultimately be up to the task because he says, **“And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”**
1. Just hours later **Peter runs to the tomb** and finds it empty.
 2. Not long thereafter, **Jesus restores Peter** with a three questions (do you love me?) On the beach after breakfast (John 21).
 3. The next time we hear about Peter, it is **Pentecost** and his bold preaching is used of God to bring **3000 people** to faith.
 4. Later **he faces great persecution** and so does the young church.
 5. His **first letter focuses on the persecution of this young church** and he offers words of encouragement and he prays for their strength in the battle at hand – just as Jesus had told him to do, **“... strengthen your brothers.”**
 6. **THIS IS JUST AS JESUS HAD PRAYED FOR HIM!**
- E. So now back to the question I raised a while ago: **why does God allow temptations and trials?**
1. For **one reason alone**: to accomplish His own good purposes.
 2. **Return to Luke 22.** What did the apostles say when Jesus said, you are going to fail? Allow me to paraphrase:
 - a) No way!
 - b) We can do this!
 - c) We are faithful and loyal!
 - d) We have what it takes!

3. As we subsequently see, nothing could be further from the truth. But **God knew that he must use this event to break them** of their self-reliance.
 - a) **God used Satan** and his plan to transform the disciples.
 - b) **God allowed this to shape them** into what they needed to be to accomplish His purpose in shepherding the church through what He knew would be a very difficult start.
4. First, last and always: **God allows Satan to take action ONLY to accomplish His purposes.**
5. God was building up the leaders in order to teach them that **they must trust HIM and not in themselves.**

VI. THERE ARE TWO CRITICAL APPLICATIONS FOR US TODAY FROM WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

- A. **Leaders are going to be attacked and they need us to pray for them.**
 1. **How you should pray for your pastor and leaders:**
 - a) **Avoid vague generalities** – that is the death of prayer
 - b) Be **specific.**
 - c) Pray for the pastor and your leaders, **the leader's spouses and children by name.**
 - d) Pray that they will **see themselves not as administrators but rather as a leader of a wartime guerrilla band** engaged in spiritual combat.
 - e) Remember that the **Evil One is a formidable foe** and we cannot defeat him in our own strength.
 - f) Help your pastor and leaders in times of struggle to remember what 1 John 4:4 teaches us: **"He who is within me is greater than he who is in the world."**
 - g) Pray that your pastor and leaders will be able to stand before the Lord and say, **"I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith."** (2 Timothy 4:7)
 - h) **In your individual devotions**, pray that your pastor and leaders will have consistent, private time with the Lord each day.

- i) In your **family prayers**, pray that your pastor and leaders will have consistent meaningful prayer time with his or her family.
- j) **Whenever you eat**, ask to equip your pastor and leaders to feed you with the whole Council of God.
- k) **Small groups** should pray for the pastor and leaders whenever they meet.

B. Everyone has a role in the work of the Kingdom.

1. Have you ever heard of Pareto's principal – the famous "80/20" rule? **[EXPLAIN]**
2. Many churches **FUNCTION** as a "cruise ship".
 - a) The smaller the ship the more people we know.
 - b) Even in a larger ship, there are those we know and a culture with which we are comfortable.
 - c) There are many restaurants and dining opportunities day and night.
 - d) We "pick and choose" where we want to eat and when we want to eat.
 - e) It is all about us.
 - f) Occasionally, we will put into a port and have a day excursion. We go or don't go as it might please us.
3. However, we are **CALLED** to be a battleship.
 - a) Our purpose is not to stay in our comfort zone; our purpose is to take the land!
 - b) Every member of the crew has an essential and critical function.
 - c) No one is simply "along for the ride."
 - d) We are to intentionally use those gifts God has given us to advance the battle.
 - e) When one of us is wounded, we are to provide healing and care while someone else takes his place.
4. Examine your own heart. Are we essentially signed up for a cruise? Or, are we enlisted for the battle!
 - a) Our decisions on this essential question will not only set our trajectory, it will effect our witness for at least a generation.
 - b) The gospel is clear. What is your response?