

# ***Undefeated***

## ***2. Undefeated Faith***

April 10-11, 2021

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Welcome to week 2 of our series “Undefeated.” Last week we saw that Jesus defeated our greatest enemy: death. Today we’re going to look at how we develop an undefeated faith.

Last year just before Covid shut things down, my wife Linda and I attended an informal concert by one of her favorite Christian singer/songwriters. We both liked the depth of her lyrics and we used her music in our private worship times. During the concert we attended, she said that she had gone through a crisis of faith a year earlier, and she thanked by name some friends who helped her find her way back.

So we were both stunned when last month this artist announced on Twitter that she is no longer a practicing Christian. It’s not just that she isn’t participating in a church – she is no longer following Christ. She has turned to other sources to guide her life. How could someone who wrote such deeply meaningful worship music turn away from God so decisively?

She is not the only high-profile believer to renounce the faith. A prominent pastor and author who wrote a book that influenced a generation also publicly declared he is no longer a Christian. Months later, an internationally famous worship leader and song writer for one of the most popular worship bands in the world had a change of heart and no longer believes.<sup>1</sup> And of course, a long time ago there was a guy named Judas who followed Jesus himself for 3 years, traveling, eating with him, seeing Jesus do miracles, learning to minister to people; and he ended up betraying Jesus to death.

Hearing about these kind of faith failures can make us wonder, “What is going on? What causes this?” In our quieter moments, those of us who are Christ-followers might wonder “How secure is my faith? Will I finish strong or will I falter, too?” If we’re feeling confident today, we can think, “Not me – I’ll never stop following Jesus.” And we may be right.

On the other hand, there is a famous example of another guy who thought the same thing; his name was Peter, and he was one of Jesus’ inner circle. The night before Jesus was arrested, he shared a private supper with his 12 disciples. During the meal, Jesus told them he was going to be betrayed and killed. Then he said something rather chilling to Peter: **Luke 22:31-34** <sup>31</sup> *“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. <sup>32</sup> But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” <sup>33</sup> But he replied, “Lord, I am ready to go*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/08/another-pop-culture-christian-loses-his-faith/>

*with you to prison and to death. <sup>34</sup> Jesus answered, "I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me."*

I don't know about you, but if the Lord told me that Satan was targeting me by name and demanding to sift me like wheat, that would alarm me. A few verses before this, Luke tells us that Satan had already succeeded in getting Judas to betray Jesus to his enemies. So the plot was in motion to crucify Jesus. But Satan wasn't done.

Now in **v. 31**, Jesus calls Peter by his original name of Simon, saying that Satan has asked to sift you. That sifting started just hours later. After Jesus was arrested, Peter was warming himself at a fire when a servant girl said, "You're one of his followers." Peter said, "No way – I don't know him." He repeated that 3 times as some others recognized him, and then the rooster crowed. Peter's time of sifting had begun.

Satan wasn't after just Simon Peter, but "all of you"; all the disciples. If they had been in Pittsburgh, Jesus would have said "yinz guys," or in the South he would have said "all y'all."

To "Sift you like wheat"—the disciples knew what that meant. At that time, farmers harvested their wheat and then they threshed it, which separated the wheat from the unusable chaff; but that didn't make wheat ready to make bread quite yet. The workers' last step was to place some wheat into the sieve. Then they **violently shook** the sieve to sift it. The good part of the wheat collected at the bottom center of the sieve. The impurities were removed, then they were left with pure wheat and no chaff.

Jesus was saying that Satan demanded permission to *violently shake* the disciples to see what's real in their faith, but notice that Satan had to ask/demand God's permission to sift. Satan can't just do whatever he wants to a believer. God evidently said "yes," and Jesus knew it, because Jesus told the disciples that he was praying for them.

If I were one of the disciples, I would have preferred that Jesus prayed that Satan would be *prevented* from sifting me, but that wasn't an option. They were going to be sifted. So Jesus interceded: he prayed that when their faith was shaken that it wouldn't fail; and He wouldn't pray unless there was a decent chance that their faith would fail.

At some point, Satan will demand to sift you and me, too. There will come a time that almost all of us will have our faith sifted; it will be shaken violently. Satan wants to take you and me out. He wants to put such pressure on our faith so that it fails. But friends, don't fear; Jesus will pray for us.

**Romans 8:34** *Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.* Jesus is praying FOR you. God is FOR you. He isn't just standing back to watch what you will do. Jesus is asking the Holy Spirit to hold you tight; He is asking *that your faith will not fail*. And we need Jesus' intercession.

Right now NASA's Mars rover *Perseverance* is exploring the planet Mars looking for signs of life, but hopes are not high because of the conditions. It's got a very thin atmosphere of mostly carbon dioxide, and most of the planet has no water. Temperatures on Mars average -81 degrees. *Perseverance* is trying to find evidence that Mars had life long ago, because right now conditions are not real conducive to life as we know it.

Conditions on earth are not always very conducive to faith. At times our daily environment can be corrosive to faith. First, **we'll be sifted by: Pain / suffering.** We live in a fallen world, so we're going to run into some pain at some point, and pain can seem alien to faith.

Peter didn't understand how Jesus could suffer and die. Once when Jesus told the twelve disciples that he was going to suffer and die, Peter said, "Surely not you, Lord!" Peter couldn't conceive of God's chosen suffering. Jesus responded, "Get behind me Satan!" Satan was at work on Peter again and Peter didn't know it. Satan was trying to lure Jesus away from the cross and was also planting ideas in Peter's mind that were not God's; the idea that God never allows people he loves to be hurt.

In the Old Testament book of Job, Satan asked God's permission to sift one his followers. He said to God, "Let's see how genuine Job's faith in you is. I bet the only reason he worships you is that you've given him a comfortable life. Take that away and he'll abandon you." God gave Satan permission to try to shake Job's faith. So, Job lost his wealth, his family, and his health. He was sifted, but his faith did not fail. If we think that, then any time we encounter sickness or loss it can violently shake our faith.

Covid has sifted some people's faith. Some have failed, at least for the moment. Maybe their faith was held together by habit or tradition and those have been unended. Others, however, are coming through Covid with a stronger faith!

We can also be sifted by doubt, disappointment, discouragement, and other forces common on the earth. But why? **Why would God allow us to be sifted?** God doesn't tell us why he allows us to be sifted, but we know that something positive happens during sifting. Remember, sifting is about purifying wheat and our faith can be purified when it is sifted. The useless parts can be tossed out.

Wayne Cordeiro points out that, "The sifting process forms new character, tearing away old perspectives and putting fresh truth in its place. Former habits are discarded and wrong tendencies abandoned."

During the process of sifting, we come to a moment when our strength is spent. Then we learn to depend on God more fully. The Apostle Paul had this experience. **2 Corinthians 1:8-9** *We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. <sup>9</sup> Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves*

*but on God, who raises the dead.* That sounds like Paul was sifted and grew stronger, more dependent on God.

“Failure, discouragement, disappointment, and difficulty often will reveal areas in our hearts where we are listening to ourselves and not to God.” The process of sifting refines us, revealing our weaknesses, exposing our self-dependence and inviting us to greater faith in God and greater dependence on his promises.

A sifted person is someone who is able, by God’s grace, to reflect on his experience and emerge from a time of trial with a better grasp of what matters most. He’s a person who has been tested, proven capable and mature. “Regardless of what we do, we live each day in the confidence that God loves us, that we belong to him, and that he is faithful to lead and guide us to become the person he wants us to be. What we do will naturally flow from who we become as the person God is shaping us into.”<sup>2</sup>

Your faith won’t fall through the sifter’s holes. Some other stuff will - false attachments, assumptions, and traditions, but it will leave behind a stronger, purified faith.

**When you are being sifted: cling to Jesus and do what he says.** If you look at the statements that those three high-profile believers issued announcing they were no longer Christians, you will find that they all share something in common: they never mention Jesus. It appears that they have lost track of Jesus amidst the doubts, the pain, or the disappointment. They say, “The Church acted badly; leaders were unethical.” Maybe that’s true, I don’t know, but that need not cause us to lose our faith, because our faith is in Jesus. The performance of the Church is chaff that blows away. Our faith is in Jesus and that is the pure wheat.

Another might say, “I was hurt badly when my friend died; or I lost my job even though I prayed about it.” Perhaps so, but our faith is not in prayer, that is chaff that blows away. Our faith is in Jesus and that is the pure wheat.

“There are contradictions in the Bible.” That can be debated, but we don’t put our faith in our interpretations of the Bible. Our faith is in Jesus and that is the pure wheat.

Our faith is vulnerable when it is separated from Jesus. Jesus told Peter ahead of time: *“before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me.”* Peter denied knowing Jesus. When did that happen? It didn’t happen when he was with Jesus at the Last Supper. It didn’t happen when Peter was with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, at that point Peter was ready to grab a sword and fight soldiers. It happened when Peter *wasn’t with Jesus*; that’s when he denied him. After Jesus was arrested, the Bible says Peter followed Jesus “at a distance,” and that was when a small group around the campfire challenged him.

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<sup>2</sup> *Sifted*, by Wayne Cordeiro

When our lives are violently shaken, that is when we need to run to Jesus, to focus on him, to seek him and do what he says. Acting on the words of Jesus will strengthen our faith. Here's why. In its purest form, faith is a positive response to God's words. It is not just agreeing that God exists or feeling a certain way. Faith is saying "Yes" when God tells us something. That is pure faith and sifting can shake loose everything that is not pure faith. So when you act on what Jesus says, you are building faith.

It doesn't have to be too mystical to respond to Jesus, just read the first four books of the New Testament. They tell you what Jesus did and said. Read what he said and do it. It will strengthen your faith. THEN, **after you are sifted, encourage others.** Jesus told Peter: *And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.* Not "If", but "When" you turn back, you will strengthen others. Jesus was confident his prayer would be answered and that his disciples would not lose their faith.

Failure is not falling down, failure is not getting back up. Jesus knew Peter would deny knowing him. That was a failure, but it wasn't permanent. Jesus was praying about what would happen after that. Peter asked Jesus for forgiveness and found it.

When we come through a time of sifting our faith will be stronger, then we will have strength to give to others. Peter was sifted but came out stronger than ever. He denied knowing Jesus at one point, but after he returned, he never denied Jesus again. Just weeks after his failure at the campfire, he stood up in the front of thousands and preached the first sermon about Jesus on Pentecost. Peter paid a price for that. The book of **Acts** tells us that he went to jail and was pulled into controversy. Tradition says he was crucified upside down. That took a strong faith. A sifted faith is purified faith.

Peter denying Jesus was not his failing. Jesus said he'd prayed that it wouldn't, and yet he knew that Peter would deny knowing him, so that must not have been the failure. It didn't fail. Why do we know that? Because Peter went on to lead the church and preach the first Christians sermon (Pentecost.)

You may be in a season of sifting, and if you respond correctly, this season can be every bit as important as the time of confident faith. Let's pray together for Jesus to strengthen our faith together.