

SECTION 4: THE CRUCIFIXION

Must I not drink the cup that my Father has given me?
John 18:11b

An Orderly, Measured Manner

Like King Saul, who attempted and failed several times to kill David, angry men made several unsuccessful attempts to kill Jesus (Lk. 4:28–30; Jn. 8:59; 10:31–39). None of those attempts had a place in God’s plan; they were merely spontaneous acts of human rage, and each time, God made a way for Jesus to escape. Satan had no part in those attacks; he was following God’s directive to kill Jesus, and it was not God’s appointed a time for Jesus to die; besides, it was beneath Satan’s dignity to take part in the rash actions of the inflamed humans who hated God’s Messiah. He was much more organized and deliberate than that. Satan may even have played a role in helping Jesus to escape in those situations.

Satan despises anarchy and disorganized hotheads. He went about his assigned mission against Jesus as he had always done his work, in an orderly, measured manner, considering the ramifications, especially how his status in heaven might be affected. His sons sometimes did likewise, taking time to plan their moves against Jesus (Mt. 22:15; Mk. 3:6; Jn. 11:53), considering how killing him would affect their status among the people (Mt. 26:5; Mk. 11:18).

Perfect hatred, like perfect love, can wait. It watches and thinks as it moves in for the kill. Satan knew it when the right time came for Jesus to die. Jesus knew it, too (Jn. 12:23; 13:1; 17:1). Everything was in place. Jesus was ready to face the cross and finish his work, and Satan was ready to take possession of Judas and finish his.

Satan in Judas

Luke tells us that Satan entered into Judas a few days before Jesus’ last Passover meal, prompting him to make his deal with the chief priests to betray Jesus (Lk. 22:4). John says that Satan entered into Judas during the Last Supper, immediately after Jesus handed Judas a piece of bread (Jn. 13:27). Both were right. No rule requires an evil spirit that possesses a person to stay inside that person continually. It is the person, not the spirit, who is in bondage. Once Judas opened his heart to Satan, Satan was free to come and go as he pleased. This lends credence to the translations of 2Timothy 2:26 which say that some are taken captive by Satan “at his will”.

Satan’s original sin was pride at being “perfect in beauty” (Ezek. 28:12), and he would never have left his perfectly beautiful body to possess a human except in hope of receiving the grand promotion to sit at God’s right hand. We cannot say, but it may even be that Satan thought that once he took his place at God’s right hand, he would be given a body more glorious than the one he already had. But it is certain that only the hope of something greater than what he had could have lured Satan out of his perfectly beautiful body to possess a man.¹ Based upon the information given us in the Bible, Satan had never before left his lovely body to possess anyone, which tells us that he viewed this moment as pivotal in God’s plan to give him the promotion he coveted.

¹ One other time, Satan wanted a human body, that of Moses (Jude 1:9), but we are not told why.

Satan Asked for the Disciples

Something Jesus said during the Last Supper shows that at that time, Satan still had access to God in heaven:

Luke 22

31. The Lord said, “O Simon, Simon! Satan has earnestly asked for you men, that he might sift you like wheat.
32. But I have prayed for you [this “you” is singular, referring only to Peter], that your faith will not give out.”

To be sifted means to be put through a hard trial, which is also what Satan suggested in the book of Job, when he said to God, “Stretch out your hand now and strike all that he has, and he will curse you to your face,” and “Stretch out your hand now and strike his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face” (Job 1:11; 2:5). In those scenes, Satan was politely suggesting that God to sift Job like wheat.

The major point to be noted, however, is that when Satan “earnestly asked for” Jesus’ disciples, he must have asked God. There was no point in him asking Pontius Pilate or Caiaphas for them; the disciples were not theirs. No one but God could have granted such a request because the disciples belongs to Him (Jn. 17:6–9). Jesus’ statement, moreover, also suggests that God granted Satan’s request to sift the disciples, for Jesus did not say to Peter, “I have prayed that you will not be sifted.” Rather, he said, “I have prayed for you, that your faith will not give out [when Satan sifts you].”

Unlike what we saw in the book of Job, we are not told how the heavenly conversation between God and Satan went when God agreed to sift the disciples, but God’s care for His people makes it certain that as in the case of Job, it was actually God’s idea to sift them, not Satan’s. God may even have initiated the subject of the disciples, as he initiated the subject of Job. If so, the conversation would have been something like this:

God: “Where have you come from?”

Satan: “From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it.”

God: “Have you considered the Messiah’s disciples, how much they love him and how faithful they are to him?”

Satan: “You know how men are. You have blessed them greatly, but stretch out your hand and put them in fear for their lives, and they will forsake that Messiah. I will bring the officers to arrest Jesus at a time when his disciples are with him. They will curse and swear they never knew him.”

God: “Behold, his disciples are in your power, only do not kill them.”

We are not told if Satan had any other thoughts about what would be sifted out of the disciples, but whatever Satan thought doesn’t matter. What determined everything that God wanted to sift something out of Jesus’ disciples, Peter especially, and He chose Satan to get it done.

The Sifting

Jesus knew men as well as Satan knew them, but even better. At the Last Supper, Jesus told the disciples that they would all forsake him that very night (Mt. 26:31), and he told Peter that he would outright deny him (Mt. 26:34). But none of Jesus' disciples could believe Jesus because they did not yet know themselves:

Mark 14 (cf. Mt. 26:35)

27a. Jesus said to them, "Tonight, all of you will be offended because of me.

....

29. Then Peter said to him, "Even though all [these other disciples] be offended, I certainly won't!"

30. And Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you that today, this very night, before a rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times."

31. But he said all the more vehemently, "If I have to die with you, I will never deny you!" And then they all began talking like that.

The disciples' sifting took place when Jesus retreated with them from Jerusalem, across the Kidron Valley, to the garden of Gethsemane to pray. There Satan, now in full possession of Judas, led officers to Jesus' usual place of prayer, and when they came, just as Jesus and Satan knew they would, the disciples forsook Jesus and fled for their lives (Mk. 14:50). But Peter's sifting did not end there; it continued after he had followed the officers and Jesus "at a distance" (Mt. 26:58) and came into the courtyard of the high priest, where a little slave girl recognized Peter. She came up to him and said, "You were definitely with Jesus of Galilee."²

Matthew 26

70. But [Peter] denied him before them all, saying, "I don't know what you're talking about."

71. But after he went out to the entranceway, another girl saw him, and she said to those who were there, "This man was definitely with Jesus the Nazarene."

72. And he again denied *it*, with an oath, saying, "I don't know the man!"

73. Then, a little while later, those standing there came up and said to Peter, "Surely, you are also one of them, for even your accent gives you away."

74. Then he began to bind himself under a curse and to swear, "I don't know the man!" And immediately, the rooster crowed.

75. And Peter was reminded of the saying Jesus had spoken to him. . . . And he went outside, and wept bitterly.

The Peter who rebuked Jesus when Jesus spoke of his approaching death and who audaciously promised Jesus that he would save him (Mt. 16:21–23), the Peter who declared to Jesus that he would never deny him even though the others did, and swore that he would die for Jesus – *that* Peter – was sifted out of Peter's soul in the high priest's courtyard. It was painful, but his proud self-confidence was sifted out of him, just as it would later be painfully sifted out of young Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). But Jesus had prayed for Peter, and Jesus' prayer saved him. Peter would never have recovered after vilely denying the Lord, but for the intercession of the Lord whom he had denied.

² In an odd twist, Judas was damned after he confessed to knowing Jesus (for money), while Peter was saved after he denied knowing him. God knew their hearts.

Peter had so little self-confidence remaining after God sifted him that he would not dare say yes when the resurrected Jesus asked Peter if he loved him more than the other disciples did:

John 21

15. When they had eaten, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love me more than these men do?” He said to him, “Surely, Lord, you know that I’m your friend.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs.”
16. Again, he said to him a second time, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love me?” He said to him, “Surely, Lord, you know that I’m your friend.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.”
17. The third time, he said to him, “Simon, son of Jonah, are you my friend?” Peter was grieved because the third time, he said to him, “Are you my friend?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I’m your friend.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.”

Peter could no longer boast of utter devotion to Jesus. Peter did love Jesus, but the excessive self-confidence which had formerly tainted Peter’s expression of that love was now sifted out of his soul. And Peter had been honest enough with himself to confess it was there, and let it go.

Holding the Door Open

Peter was learning an invaluable lesson of spiritual life, namely, that we humans have no strength against either the spirits of this age or our own sinful nature and that the only appropriate attitude for us is abject humility and thanksgiving to God that “when we were yet without strength, Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6). Without help from God, we can see nothing rightly, not God, not Jesus, not Satan, not even ourselves – perhaps especially ourselves, in the light of such scriptures as Jeremiah 17:9: “The heart is more deceitful than anything, and it is incurable. Who knows it?”

After God humbled Saul of Tarsus, he passed on to others a valuable warning, to wit, do not trust in your own judgment of anyone or anything:

1Corinthians 4

3. To me, it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you, or by any human judgment; indeed, I do not even judge myself.
4. I am conscious of nothing against myself; however, by that, I am not justified. The Lord is the one who judges me.
5. So, judge nothing before the time, but wait until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and expose the intentions of hearts, and then from God will praise be given to each one.

God has never allowed Satan to learn this lesson, and He never will. Satan has always judged himself instead of waiting on God, and his damnation is set. God delivered Peter from his misguided opinion of himself and Peter became a new man in Christ, but He has condemned Satan to remain as he is forever. Most important, however, God is still God, and He is still, at this moment, holding the door open to us, full of compassion. God is still God, and He still, even in this covenant, uses Satan to accomplish His purpose, whenever He chooses to do so. Paul told the Corinthians that “a messenger of Satan” had been sent to trouble him with a “thorn in the flesh” (2Cor. 12:7b), but Paul was not glorifying Satan’s power. He knew that God ordained that messenger to be sent, for that “thorn in the flesh” had a holy purpose, namely, to prevent Paul’s spirit from becoming puffed up by the many great gifts given to him (2Cor. 12:7c).

All Things Are Yours

Paul admonished the saints that God will turn over to Satan those of His household who persist in rejecting His gentler corrective measures (1Cor. 5:1–5). That may seem harsh, but as in Paul’s case, such chastisement has a healing purpose. In one case, Paul turned certain men in the congregation in Ephesus over to Satan for teaching a particularly bad doctrine, but then he said that the purpose for turning them over to Satan was to teach them not to do what they were doing (1Tim. 1:20). In other words, there was hope for them, and the punishment was intended to do them good by making them see they needed to change. It is a good thing that Satan was still around so that they could be turned over to him – if they would learn from it to fear God and do His will. In Christ, not only do God’s faithful angels minister to us (Heb. 1:13–14), but Satan and his angels are our servants, too; they are never our masters. As Paul told the Corinthians,

1 Corinthians 3

21b. All things are yours,

22. whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things that are present,
or things to come; all things are yours,

23. and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

So, even though God cast Satan and his angels out of heaven, God and they are still themselves. We humans are the ones who can change, but only because God is still willing to change us. And we should be very thankful for that; it will not always be that way. After the final Judgment, no more changes will be allowed anywhere.