

Recall how Bunyan in his famous allegory introduces Satan (Bunyan quote #1).

Christian “had gone but a little way” before running into him. With much pastoral wisdom, Bunyan recognized the inevitability of spiritual warfare for every believer. “Apollyon” → “Destroyer” (Rev 9.11) and refers “either to the devil himself or an evil representative of the devil” (Beale, in loc.). Clearly Bunyan intends the devil himself, “Satan” (“Adversary”).

It seems to me that most Christians today amble on as practical secularists, heedless of the reality and dangers of the supernatural realm. We are like Elisha’s servant, blind to angels and demons all around us (2 Kgs 6.15-17). While there are a few Christians who see demons under every bush, most err in the opposite way.

Peter had the benefit of personal instruction about his own particular case straight from the lips of Jesus Himself. This brief conversation between them anticipates the approach of Apollyon. While it relates a unique historical event, it is also full of instruction to Christians generally. To be forewarned is to be forearmed.

Later, Peter would write to the churches, “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world” (1 Pet 5.8-9). Peter was discerning, not superstitious. This applies to all Christians. **Anticipate Apollyon.** We may not escape unscathed, but by grace we can escape after all.

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SATAN’S AMBITION (22.31)

Jesus called “the Lord” (Gk. *kurios*, connotes power and authority) to emphasize His sovereignty over both Satan and Simon Peter. All three are “free moral agents” and act freely, exercising their own wills, but Satan, Peter, and all moral beings are ultimately subservient to Christ and His will (Job 2.1-6; Luke 8.32; Prov 16.9; Acts 4.27-28). The Lord alone is free to carry out whatsoever He pleases (Dan 4.35).

“Simon, Simon.” Only later did Jesus name him Peter (Mark 3.16); before then he was known as “Simon Bar-jona” [lit. son of Jonah] (Matt 16.17; cf. John 1.44). The name “Peter” means rock. Maybe Jesus called him Simon here to remind him of his weakness. The name repetition “indicates emphasis and deep concern” (Hendriksen). Jesus, knowing the spiritual danger to which Peter was oblivious, wanted to get his attention and make him feel his vulnerability.

Context: Jesus has just prophesied a glorious future for them (22.29-30), but hope could degenerate into triumphalism and feelings of invincibility. God’s promises of future grace were never intended to make us presumptuous and cocky, but to encourage moment-by-moment carefulness and recovery when we have fallen. This is not intuitive, but saints come to embrace its reason (e.g. Josh 1.6-7).

“Behold” (lit., look!) is the exclamation of one pointing out something for careful attention (Thayer). Jesus is about to reveal the unseen in the spiritual realm.

“Satan.” Here, the first truth for attention is essentially that *Satan wants you, Simon*, and this is something you should consider well. The one who rallied countless angels to rebellion, the original liar and murderer, the head of a vast and infernal kingdom on earth, now has his sights trained on you, Peter. The most fearsome destroyer and adversary of God’s people is out to get you.

“Hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat.” The same imagery appeared before in a context of severe divine chastening, “I will sift the house of Israel among all nations, like as corn is sifted in a sieve” (Amos 9.9). This process was familiar in Jewish homes for separating the kernel from the chaff; the plant heads were subject to vigorous shaking that broke them to pieces. A comparable idiom of ours is, “that he may put you through the mill.” Satan’s aim in this was not purification but destruction. He wanted to expose Peter’s weaknesses and cause his spiritual downfall—even though Peter was already genuinely saved.

In his campaign against you, Satan does not surrender at your conversion. As far as he is concerned, this is mortal combat. Bunyan’s Apollyon said to Christian, “Prepare to die; for I swear by my infernal den, that thou shalt go no farther: here I will spill thy soul.” If anything, conversion signals an increase in Satanic hostilities! In C. S. Lewis’ “The Screwtape Letters,” the wicked advisor writes to his minion,

My dear Wormwood, I note with grave displeasure that your patient has become a Christian. Do not indulge the hope that you will escape the usual penalties; . . . In the meantime we must make the best of the situation. There is no need to despair; hundreds of these adult converts have been reclaimed after a brief sojourn in the Enemy’s camp and are now with us. All the habits of the patient, both mental and bodily, are still in our favor (Letter II).

Note further, “Satan has desired to have YOU” (plural form—all the disciples, not just Peter). “The request is especially for Peter, in recognition that he is ‘first among equals.’ Perhaps by exposing Peter, all will lose heart” (Bock). Brethren, all of you must come to grips with your vulnerability to Satanic attack and your native naïvete/weakness against him. Only in this way will you be aware of danger and your need of the Savior, both important safeguards.

CHRIST’S INTERCESSION (22.32a)

After this word of warning, Christ immediately assures Peter of His love and protection. This is the only reasonable hope for deliverance. One of the marks of real Christians is that they fundamentally trust in Christ, not themselves. Our faith in Christ is an evidence that we worship Him as our God and Savior. To place ultimate trust for salvation anywhere else is the grave sin of idolatry.

The OT records many military conflicts, mostly involving Israel. They were supposed to trust in the Lord alone—not in weapons or strategy or allies (e.g., Psa

33.16-22). Their success/failure followed their faith or unbelief, respectively. Sometimes they fought, and sometimes God gave victory miraculously.

It is even more obvious that we must depend on the Lord in spiritual warfare! Ultimately, everything depends on Him and what He does for us.

“But I have prayed for thee.” The verb has the sense of making supplication to God, to beg earnestly. Contrast Satan’s “prayers” (different word, also means to beg).

Satan has begged for you / to sift you as wheat, but
I begged concerning you / that your faith might not fail

Jesus’ prayers to the Father prevail over Satan’s. Jesus did not intercede for Judas Iscariot and Satan entered into him and totally destroyed him. Nor does Christ pray for the whole world generally, but only for His elect (John 17.9, 20). Christ prays that God the Father would keep the elect from the evil one (John 17.11-15).

“That thy faith fail not.” Here Jesus recognized Peter’s already-existing faith and its liability to fail, but the Lord’s intercession gained its ultimate preservation, if not its constant and active exercise. Peter’s faith would soon falter, but for him this was a believer’s weakness and sin, only a partial and temporary apostasy. “That your faith might not *fail*,” i.e., cease to exist, die out, come to an end (so the Gk.). Real Christians persevere in faith because Christ preserves our faith, not vice versa.

MINISTRY AFTER SPIRITUAL RECOVERY (22.32b)

Jesus gives Peter a pastoral charge for the time after his faith would falter and after he would repent.

“And when thou art converted.” *When not if* → certainty of Peter’s recovery founded upon Christ’s effectual intercession for him.

“Converted,” lit., “to turn, to return.” Basically, this is the idea of repentance. With good reason we usually associate this word with one’s initial entrance into the kingdom of God, but here it definitely refers to saved Peter’s spiritual recovery. NKJV: “When you have returned to *Me*, strengthen your brethren.” Remember, Peter’s fall was very personal: *from* Jesus, and so the recovery would be *to* Jesus.

The charge for afterward: “strengthen [establish, support] your brethren.” Peter’s brethren were liable to fall too, and so they needed to be strengthened by Peter’s ministry. The grammatical form “calls for a specific act” (LEKGNT). Peter would strengthen them by praying for them like Jesus does, teaching them like Jesus does, leading them by example like Jesus does, etc., for Jesus is the Source of spiritual strengthening, and ministers are just the instruments (cf. 1 Thess 3.2, 12-13).

FOOLISH SELF-CONFIDENCE (22.33)

Peter was already showing weakness by disbelieving the announcement of his fall, implied by the prediction of his return. This is an emotionally-charged scene. Peter truly did love Jesus who was saying that His death was near. Peter saw how lovingly humble Jesus was toward His disciples, washing their feet. No open enemies were near, so it was easy to be brave, so the impetuous one blurted out,

“Lord, I am ready to go with thee, both into prison, and to death.”

Cf. John 13.37, “Peter said unto him, Lord, . . . I will lay down my life for thy sake.” The poignant thing about this is that Peter was completely sincere. He really believed he was ready to pay the ultimate price, but he didn’t know his own heart like Jesus did. Perhaps Peter should have said, “Lord, thank you for praying that my faith will not fail, and please pray that it will not even falter!” But instead of fully trusting in the Lord, Peter trusted to some degree in himself.

Self-confidence is sinful and unreasonable. “A wise man fears and departs from evil, but a fool rages and is self-confident” (Prov 14.16 NKJV; cf. 28.26). Now it is true that “the righteous are bold as a lion” (Prov 28.1), but only because they trust in the Lord instead of themselves! See 1 Cor 10.12: to “think you stand” evidently means to think you *cannot* fall and so to forget the caution of prayerful dependence on the grace of God.

HUMILIATING FALL (22.34)

Jesus stresses how *soon* (“the cock shall not crow this day” → before morning light) and how *deliberately* (“thrice”) and how *grievously* (“that shalt deny that thou knowest Me” → the greatest possible disassociation) Peter will sin against Him. Christ was going to die for Peter’s salvation, and Peter was going to save his own skin by leaving Christ to be tortured and murdered by His enemies!

This was Peter’s losing a battle against Satan (Adversary), and Apollyon (Destroyer), ordained by Christ for Peter’s ultimate good, to teach him some unforgettable lessons about Satan’s power, Christ’s grace, and Peter’s need for it.

Peter lost a battle but ultimately won the war. Tradition says he became a martyr and was finally crucified upside down. And along the way, Peter suffered some battle scars in his contentions with the devil. To convey the serious danger of Satanic attacks, Bunyan described Christian’s battle with Apollyon this way (see Bunyan quote #2).

Brethren, let us acknowledge our vulnerability and anticipate Apollyon in our own lives, and then give ourselves to watch and pray, lest we fall into temptation, for

Jesus Christ alone preserves His disciples from being devoured by Satan.

And when we have sinned, let us not despair, but be recovered by grace, and return to the work of strengthening our brethren. Amen.

BUNYAN QUOTE #1

But now, in this valley of Humiliation, poor Christian was hard put to it; for he had gone but a little way before he espied a foul fiend coming over the field to meet him: his name is Apollyon. Then did Christian begin to be afraid, and to cast in his mind whether to go back, or to stand his ground. But he considered again, that he had no armor for his back, and therefore thought that to turn the back to him might give him greater advantage with ease to pierce him with his darts; therefore he resolved to venture and stand his ground: for, thought he, had I no more in mine eye than the saving of my life, it would be the best way to stand. So he went on, and Apollyon met him. Now the monster was hideous to behold: he was clothed with scales like a fish, and they are his pride; he had wings like a dragon, and feet like a bear, and out of his belly came fire and smoke; and his mouth was as the mouth of a lion (The Pilgrim's Progress, I.4).

BUNYAN QUOTE #2

Then Christian drew his sword, for he saw it was time to rouse himself; and Apollyon immediately attacked him, throwing darts as thick as hail; by which, despite all Christian could do to avoid it, Apollyon wounded his head, his hand, and foot. This made Christian retreat a little: Apollyon, therefore, pursued his work furiously, and Christian again took courage, and resisted as manfully as he could. This sore combat lasted more than half a day, even till Christian was almost totally exhausted: for you surely realize, that Christian, because of his wounds, grew weaker and weaker.

Then Apollyon, seeing his opportunity, drew near to Christian, and wrestling with him, caused him a dreadful fall; and with that Christian's sword flew out of his hand. Then Apollyon said, I am sure to overcome you now: and with that he had almost pressed him to death, so that Christian began to despair of life. But, as God would have it, while Apollyon was fetching his last blow, by which to make a full end of this good man, Christian nimbly reached out his hand for his sword, and caught it, saying, Rejoice not against me, O my enemy: when I fall, I shall arise; and with that gave him a deadly thrust, which made him fall back, as one that had received his mortal wound. Christian realizing that, attacked him again, saying, Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us. And with that Apollyon spread forth his dragon wings, and sped him away, that Christian saw him no more.

In this combat no man can imagine, unless he had seen and heard, as I did, what yelling and hideous roaring Apollyon made the whole time of the fight; he spoke like a dragon: and on the other side, what sighs and groans burst from Christian's heart. I never saw him all the while give so much as one pleasant look, till he realized he had wounded Apollyon with his two-edged sword; then, indeed, he did smile, and look upward! But it was the most dreadful sight that I ever saw (The Pilgrim's Progress, I.4).