

Lecture 28 – “Stumbling Blocks”

Psalms 120; Proverbs 20, 23

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“Nothing damages our dignity like stumbling!” When I read this quote from Charles Swindoll, my mind went immediately to a day in India in 2019. I was on an Eastside mission trip for educators who would have the opportunity to teach Indian children at a Christian school in a Buddhist country. Our goal was to provide engaging lessons for students and motivating teaching strategies for teachers.

While there, our mission team was invited to be guests of honor at an assembly to be introduced to hundreds of students and staff members at the school. I made a momentous entry to the assembly. My arms were full of my teaching materials as we had to transport our materials from classroom to classroom and up and down stairs in a 4-story building. The weather was hot and humid and my sweat rings were growing. As I hurried in, I did not see a slight rise in the cement and I stumbled and fell in front of the many observers. A hush immediately fell across the assembly hall and I remember seeing the shocked faces of my team members who were already on the stage as I was falling.

Think back to a time when you stumbled and failed. Perhaps you will agree with me that nothing is more humiliating or embarrassing than falling flat on your pride whether it is physically falling or publicly falling short of a performance expectation. Some of my stumbling experiences make me shudder just to call them to mind.

As I recall, I picked myself up, shrugged off the momentary humiliation, and joined my colleagues on the stage. I knew then that there was something to be learned in this business of stumbling, and I certainly found that out in 2023 as I prepared for this presentation. One of those learnings comes from God’s message in Jeremiah 6:21: “I will lay stumbling blocks before this people.”

From this passage, we know that God allowed obstacles to happen in the lives of His people to turn them from their backsliding, and back to a healthy relationship with Him. With this knowledge, it is my prayer that we will be more reflective as to the obstacles in our own lives and that each of us will commit to changing those stumbling blocks into stepping stones that lead to a stronger relationship with our Lord and King.

Let’s examine some of those rocks now.

Stumbling Block of Relativism

Each of us has a worldview, whether we realize it or not. We have constructed a set of beliefs by which we understand life. We have a view of God, or of no God. We have a view of self, some concept of the meaning of life, and a set of values. Many of the values we grew up with may have changed as a result of the strong influence of our culture and changing times. And so, some believers have adapted their way of thinking to include the doctrine of relativism--that knowledge, truth, and morality exist in relation to culture, society, or historical context and are not absolute. I had to examine my own beliefs because I do want to be tolerant and respectful of everyone’s differences, but I know I must not waiver when it comes to God and His Word. He is our standard and He never changes.

Relativism seems to be sweeping the religious landscape and tolerance for all religious viewpoints seem to be the current “coin of the realm.” And so, we make a choice – we can be set adrift amid a sea of **relativism** or be anchored in the truth of God.

Isaiah warns us to not replace God with competing ideologies in chapter 8, verse 13. Faith needs to remain our steering wheel. If we’re not discerning, we may highly regard views that replace God in our thinking. There are many competing philosophies in our world, and many dangerous ideas.

Isaiah makes a critical point in verses 14-15: God will be for us either a stepping stone or a stumbling block...either our hiding place or a boulder blocking our way. We need to guard against getting side-tracked by secular notions. We need to maintain a biblically-informed focus. It is said that “Large stones were placed in pathways as a warning to travelers...we ignore them at our own peril.”

Jesus spoke similar words when He warned that if we are not careful, we may build our house on shifting sand (Matthew 7:24); we need to build our lives upon the bedrock of truth. And Peter, who quotes this passage from Isaiah in his first epistle, warns that people stumble because they choose to reject the Cornerstone and His message (1 Peter 2:7-8).

Stumbling Block of Skepticism

Many people do not embrace the Bible as the inspired Word of God. They are skeptical of the miracles and events written about in the Bible. Their **skepticism** has become a stumbling block in their lives.

Charles Swindoll tells a humorous story about a little boy who rushed out of his Sunday School class to find his parents. After a quick search, he grabbed his daddy by the leg and enthusiastically said, "Man, that story about Moses and all those people crossing the Red Sea was great!" His father looked down at him, smiled, and asked the boy to tell him about it.

"Well, the Israelites got out of Egypt, you see. But Pharaoh and his army chased them clear across the desert. The Egyptian Army was getting closer and closer. So, Moses got on his walkie-talkie and told the Israeli Air Force to bomb the Egyptians. While that was happening, the Israeli Navy built a pontoon bridge so that the people could cross over. And, they made it!"

The boy's father was shocked and asked, "Son, are you sure that's how your Sunday School teacher taught the story?"

"Well, no, not really," the boy replied, "but if I told you how my Sunday School teacher told it to me, you'd never believe it."

The obvious question to all of us is, "Do you believe in miracles?"

In the *Christian Post*, Reverend Mark Creech stated:

"Skepticism and unquestioning reliance upon science today have caused fewer people to believe in them (miracles). Fraudulent televangelists claiming to work miracles and swindling people out of their money have undermined belief in them, too. Some doubt the reality of miracles because they've never seen or experienced one. Many Progressive Christians dismiss the relevance of miracles to the Gospel story and Bible teaching."

Some would argue that what is perceived as a miracle can always be explained by science or natural phenomena. And so, they negate God's presence and His ability to sustain and direct nature as He pleases.

Reverend Creech knows this to be a falsehood and shares his father's experience with all who will listen. His parents went country line dancing to celebrate their 39th wedding anniversary. During a dance, his father suddenly experienced a cardiac arrest and fell to the floor.

Two emergency medical technicians were dancing next to him when he collapsed. They quickly moved to start CPR but couldn't because he bit his tongue in the fall and blood was oozing from his mouth. One of the EMTs shouted, "I need something for an airway!" A woman standing nearby, who wasn't an associate of either EMT, pulled out an oval plastic tube a few inches long from her purse. She had kept it there for no apparent reason. She gave it to the EMT who quickly used it as an airway and the life-saving CPR began.

In the meantime, a gentleman from the other side of the dance hall heard the commotion and went over to see what was happening. He was a cardiac physician who had a set of defibrillator paddles in his car that evening. The paddles were retrieved and used on Creech's father, hitting him a total of nine times.

Even after his brain had been deprived of blood and oxygen for a solid 20 minutes, the ninth hit of the defibrillator restarted his father's heart again. When he arrived by ambulance at the hospital, his team of physicians could not explain why he had not suffered any brain damage. He would live eighteen more productive years with a testimony of God's grace always on his lips.

Reverend Creech commented that there was no other explanation for his father's survival other than it was God's divine intervention that saved his dad. The circumstances defied logic.

The Bible is a book filled with historical accounts of incredible miracles. When Jesus performed them, His worst critics could not deny their reality.

Apologist, Josh McDowell, summarizes the matter with these words:

"There are accounts of blind people who immediately received their sight, dead people being raised and extraordinary occurrences within nature, such as a universal flood and the parting of the Red Sea...The very first verse of the Bible decides the issues. 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' (Genesis 1:1). If this verse can be accepted at face value, that in the beginning an infinite, personal God created the universe, then the rest should not be a problem. If He has the ability to do this, then a virgin birth, walking on water, feeding five thousand people with a few loaves and fish, and the other biblical miracles, become not only possible, but expected...Of course, if one does not believe in God, he will not accept the miraculous, but for those who have granted the possibility it is not at all ridiculous."

Don't allow unbelief or doubts about miracles or biblical truths to become a stumbling block to your faith. If you believe in God, it sensibly follows you should believe in His omnipotent power. "With God all things are possible," said Jesus (Matthew 19:26).

Stumbling Blocks of Career Rejection, Personal Setbacks, and Illness

It is easy to become discouraged when we lose a job, experience a personal setback, or develop a serious medical condition. The next two accounts are true stories told by Max Lucado that stand as great illustrations of people who have chosen to see overwhelming problems as stepping stones rather than boulders to stumble over. Here is the first account:

Though talented, she went unrecognized for years. Prestigious opera circles rejected her when she tried to enter. American critics ignored her compelling voice. She was repeatedly rejected for parts for which she easily qualified. It was only after she went to Europe and won the hearts of tough-to-please European audiences that stateside influencers acknowledged her talent.

Not only was her professional life a battle, her personal life had been marked by struggles. She was the mother of two handicapped children, one of whom was severely developmentally challenged. In order to escape the pace of New York City, she purchased a home on Martha's Vineyard. It burned to the ground two days before she was to move in.

Professional rejection. Personal setbacks. Perfect soil for the seeds of bitterness. A receptive field for the roots of resentment. But in the case of internationally acclaimed opera singer and retired Director of the New York City Opera, Beverly Sills, anger found no home. Her friends didn't call her bitter; they called her "Bubbles." How can a person handle such professional rejection and personal trauma and still be known as Bubbles? "I choose to be cheerful," she said. "Years ago, I knew I had little or no choice about success, circumstances or even happiness; but I knew I could choose to be cheerful."

In the next account, Pastor Lucado shared an intimate meeting with a husband and wife, Glyn and Don:

Glyn opened by saying, "We have prayed for healing. God has not given it. But he has blessed us." Glyn spoke slowly. Partly because of her conviction. Partly because of her disease. Her husband, Don, sat in the chair next to her. The three of us had come together to plan a funeral—hers. And now, with that task done, with the hymns selected and the directions given, Glyn spoke. "He has given us strength we did not know. He gave it when we needed it and not before." Her words were slurred, but clear. Her eyes were moist, but confident.

"God has given us peace in our pain. He covers us all the time. Even when we are out of control, He is still there."

It had been a year since Glyn and Don had learned of Glyn's condition—Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (Lou Gehrig's Disease). The cause and the cure remain a mystery. But the result doesn't.

Muscle strength and mobility steadily deteriorate, leaving only the mind and the faith. And it was the coming together of Glyn's mind and faith that caused me to realize I was doing more than planning a funeral. I was beholding faith in God that had been refined through the journey of despair.

Glyn continued, "I hope this will not cause my family to be bitter. I hope I can be an example that God is wanting us to trust in the good times and the bad. For if we don't trust when times are tough, we don't trust at all."

Don held her hand. He wiped her tears. He wiped his own.

"Who are these two?" I asked myself as I watched him touch a tissue to her cheek. "Who are these, who, on the edge of life's river, can look across with such faith?"

The moment was solemn and sweet. I said little. One is not bold in the presence of the sacred.

Here is a personal story of a young lady who is a survivor. She was born with Cerebral Palsy. She was sexually abused when she was a young girl by a family member. When she told her mother what the family member had done to her, her mom refused to believe her. From then on, the girl felt estranged from her mother—that person who should have been her protector. Now, she has no support from family members. Now, she must count on caregivers to get her out of bed in the morning and get her back in bed at night. Caregivers take care of her needs throughout the day. She suffers with depression and anger, but instead of becoming sullen and bitter and a "God Blamer," she chooses to trust Him for her future.

She has freedom from her stumbling block because she refuses to see herself as chair-bound; instead, she identifies herself simply as a follower of Jesus Christ. She looks forward to celebrating with a new body in heaven. In fact, she has plans to run and dance when she gets there.

Yes, I am describing our very own Gloria Caballero who attends the morning session of People of the Word. She could have asked for sympathy or pity, but she did just the opposite. She chooses to put a smile on her face and share her testimony and her love for Jesus Christ with all who will listen.

Gloria served at Eastside as a greeter in the pre-COVID days. She shared her great big smile and welcomed all who came through her door. Gloria was especially happy to talk with children which let them know that she was approachable even though she had disabilities.

Unfortunately, Gloria has just encountered another stumbling block. Her motorized wheelchair broke down and she probably will not be able to rejoin us this term as she relies on the wheelchair to get her onto the Access bus, into our meetings, and home again. The estimated repair time is "several weeks." I am glad to say that she had already started the process of obtaining a new chair before this happened, but that takes even longer. Please add Gloria to your prayer list.

The people in these accounts are rock stars of faith and have chosen to be joyful rather than be **disappointed or angry with God** who allowed their condition to exist. They are examples to us that we can use any tragedy as a stumbling block or a stepping stone.

Proverbs 20 and 23 and the Stumbling Block of Addiction

The problem of addiction can be a huge stumbling block to our Christian journey. According to Charles Swindoll:

"For many, the physical and emotional dependence upon a particular substance is a grim, unrelenting reality, and statistics suggest that substance abuse isn't going away. If anything, the problem has expanded to include more people than ever."

Both Proverbs 20 and 23 address the huge stumbling block of addiction.

Proverbs 20 starts out with this warning:

"*Wine* is a mocker, *strong drink* a brawler,

And whoever is *intoxicated* by it is not wise" (20:1).

While at first Solomon appeared to target the substance, a closer look shows that he, in fact, took aim at addiction. Neither wine nor strong drink is inherently evil. In fact, wine was a necessary part of daily life in ancient times. Up until the 1800s, when municipal water supplies first became safe to drink, everyone in the family—children included—drank wine . . . *in moderation*. Responsibly!

This proverb implies that the sin is not merely one instance of drunkenness, but a downward direction in lifestyle. The words "wine" and "strong drink" stand for addiction or compulsion. Therefore, the "intoxication" may not be merely the effects of alcohol on the brain but the influence of addictions on one's life.

If you know of a person who struggles with a substance addiction or compulsion, encourage that person to seek support and the accountability of a community to help guide them. *Celebrate Recovery* is an effective program provided by many churches which I believe can help those who have an addiction, face it head on and escape "temptation's power." I believe God has the power to provide a way for each of us to escape our addictions and compulsions.

The problem of addiction goes beyond the abuse of alcohol or drugs. Addictions can develop out of virtually any substance or compulsive behavior. Very often people turn to certain behaviors because they find temporary relief from emotional pain. For example, one might soothe one's troubled mind or cheer one's depressed spirit with an online shopping spree. The thrill of the deal and the enjoyment of having new things helps the shopper feel better . . . for a while. Studies have shown that compulsive behaviors actually trigger the release of chemicals that bathe the brain in pleasant emotions. The experience sparked by these hormones and enzymes can become addictive and the withdrawal symptoms remarkably severe.

The shopping spree can make one feel better for a short while . . . until, of course, the bills come due. Then the consequences hit, triggering more stress and depression. The feelings of guilt, shame, stress, and depression then trigger a craving for the compulsive behavior or addictive substances—including food---and the downward cycle continues.

My Strange Addiction is a reality television show that featured some of the oddest compulsive behaviors. Here are just a few:

- One man repeatedly covered his body in plaster casts because it made him feel snug and comfortable to the tune of \$50,000.
- A 35-year-old lady ingested up to 8 dryer sheets a day for four years. The reason? She loved the clean laundry scent and taste. She ingested at least 3,000 sheets each year.
- A 27-year-old man ate glass and bullets. He enjoyed the satisfying crunch as he bit into them. He admittedly got a huge rush from doing that because bullets are so dangerous. In addition, he was addicted to the attention he got from people and he had no plans to stop.
- A 53-year-old woman was addicted to bee stings. She believed that this would give her relief from the pain she experienced from arthritis. She was stinging herself with 15 bees each day. She was up to 50,000 stings in total.

A person with an addiction can experience a kind of mental transformation. Perceptions change. Defenses go up. Hypocrisy takes over. Note Solomon's depiction:

"Your eyes will see strange things
And your mind will utter perverse things.
And you will be like one who lies down in the middle of the sea,
Or like one who lies down on the top of a mast" (23:33-34).

In these verses, Solomon describes the feeling of drunkenness. In a much deeper sense, however, he describes the mind of an addict under the control of addiction.

As soon as addicts are clear of the last round of difficulties—the last hangover, the last scrape with the law, the last job lost – they're planning the next opportunity to indulge their craving.

Here are a few more warnings about addictions for us to consider. As I turned my attention to Proverbs 23, my eyes went immediately to the words of verse 2...that "if anyone is given to gluttony, he or she should put a knife to his or her throat...." Rather than do that, I immediately started a diet.

However, Pastor Dr. Bill Edgar gives us an interesting look at Proverbs 23:1-3. These verses say, "When you sit down to eat with a person of power, consider carefully what is before you; and put a knife to your throat if you *are* a man given to appetite. Do not desire his delicacies, for they are deceptive food."

This warning about eating dinner in Proverbs (22:17-24:34) tells the “son,” for whom Proverbs is meant, to watch out when a ruler invites him to dinner. No matter how good the food, he should curb his appetite. The food is deceptive.

The point is not a warning about poison, or that eating too much may dim your wits. The warning is about the ruler and about man’s addiction to power and self-importance! For no matter how hospitably he acts, a “ruler” does not invite you to dinner because he wants a new friend. More likely, he has plans for you that he will only partially expose. Those in power know how to use and abuse people! It’s what they do. A dinner invitation, used in the proverb as a figure of speech, can be a powerful tool of manipulation.

You will recall Queen Esther’s story in the Bible. She used the bait of a feast to lure her enemy Haman into a trap because he was scheming to kill all of the Jews, her people. (See Esther 5-7).

In his book *That Hideous Strength*, C.S. Lewis explores both the heady feeling and dangers of being invited into the inner circle which, of course, could be a stumbling block for some. Dining with a ruler comes with the heady feeling of self-importance because everyone envies those who are part of an inner circle, whether that means being with the popular kids in school, having a “place at the table” in politics, or being invited to eat with the Queen. The danger comes from the “ruler” and the price of taking what he has to offer. Take it all, and you will be easy for him to use and discard you when he is done.

This proverb is not cynical. It is realistic, as Jesus was when “many believed in His name,” but he “did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people...for He Himself knew what was in man.” (John 2:23-24) Jesus commands his followers to be “wise as serpents, harmless as doves,” but never naïve (Matthew 10:16). When the guy at the top invites you to dinner, get a solid grip on yourself (knife to throat), and beware the “perks” (delicacies). They are deceptive.

Oh, and by the way, I did take Proverbs 23:2 to heart...I am still on my diet.

Psalm 120: The Stumbling Blocks of Deceitful Tongues and Dwelling Among Those Who Hate Peace

As we turn our attention to Psalm 120, we see that it communicates the message that when we find ourselves experiencing distress and disappointment, we have three responsibilities to fulfill if our burdens are to become blessings. We must pray (verses 1-2), trust God (verses 3-4), and patiently endure (verses 5-7).

In verses 1 and 2, instead of complaining about his situation and allowing stumbling blocks to develop into boulders along his spiritual pathway, the psalmist shared it with the Lord. He writes:

“In my distress I cried to the Lord
and He heard me.
Deliver my soul, O Lord, from lying lips
And from a deceitful tongue.”

The songwriter’s problem was that people were lying about him and slandering his name. He knew that when God’s people are slandered, they can still have confidence that God hears their prayers.

Charles Spurgeon tells us: “When we are slandered it is a joy that the Lord knows us, and cannot be made to doubt our uprightness. He will not hear the lie against us, but He will hear our prayer against the lie.”

We, too, can have that same confidence and joy, but it is important that we take the action step to pray and lay our concerns at the feet of the Lord.

The psalmist shifted from his prayer to God to speak to the false tongue of those who caused him distress. He warned those lying lips of their destiny, of what shall be done to them in verses 3 and 4:

"What will he give you,
And what will He do to you,
You deceitful tongue?
A warrior's sharp arrows
With burning charcoal!"

Rather than addressing his enemies, the psalmist is sharing the message God gave him in answer to his prayers. The writer did not need to attack the enemy because the Lord would do it for him. He was confident that God would punish the enemy with their own weapons and the consequences would be far worse. These verses are a call to action for believers to trust God.

And finally in verses 5-7, the psalmist aches because he lived among the ungodly and was distant from Israel and its people. He longed for God's *shalom* (peace); his enemies, with lying lips hated God's *shalom*. The psalmist states, "I am for peace; but when they speak, they are for war." (verse 7)

The call for action for believers is that we must take an active role in patiently enduring. This is the way Joseph dealt with his brothers in Canaan and his false accusers in Egypt. It is also the way David dealt with King Saul and how Jesus dealt with His enemies (1 Peter 2:18-25).

I believe that this psalm calls us to pray confidently for deliverance from false accusers. It serves as a powerful reminder that we must live with the tension of being in the world while not belonging to it.

Application:

Anything can be a stumbling block in your life. If you encounter a problem with no immediate solution, you can either lash out at it, resent it and feel sorry for yourself--or you can see it as a stepping stone to God's peace and comfort. Viewed through this lens, the obstacle that frustrated you becomes a *light and momentary trouble*. (See 2 Corinthians 4:16-18.)

Here are some specific steps that will help you conquer the boulders in your life:

- 1) When we encounter those who embrace relativism or those who express skepticism about the truth of the Bible, share the gospel and explain how it has changed your life. Pray for the individual and remember, "With God all things are possible." (Matthew 19:26)
- 2) As we address the stumbling block of addiction, we must stand strong in the knowledge that no addiction is stronger than the Almighty. We must never forget that His power can still storms, heal diseases and raise the dead. As believers, we cling to His promise regarding temptation in 1 Corinthians 10:13:

"No temptation has come upon you except what is common to humanity. But God is faithful; He will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation He will also provide the way out so that you may be able to bear it.

- 3) When we are distressed by the stumbling block of deceitful people who slander our name, we can follow the psalmist's plan from Psalm 120: PRAY, TRUST GOD, and PATIENTLY ENDURE in the knowledge that God hears our prayers and He will act in our favor.
- 4) When you stumble, and we all do, remember James 3:2 "For we **all** stumble in many ways." Pick yourself up and brush off the dirt with the promise of God's forgiveness—and move on!
- 5) Embrace the stones that are in your way. God just may have placed them there for a reason!