

DOCTRINE OF STUMBLING AND STUMBLING BLOCKS

I. Introduction.

- A. A careful study of the Word of God reveals that stumbling and stumbling blocks are an issue for even the positive believer.
- B. Physical stumbling over some impediment provides the physical reality that certainly has a spiritual counterpart.
- C. Just as there are various degrees in which a person can stumble in the physical realm, so also there are various degrees of stumbling in the spiritual realm.
- D. One can trip over something, momentarily lose his balance, and then quickly regain it; alternately, one can trip over something, lose his balance completely, and experience a permanent fall from which he cannot recover.
- E. Many believers may only consider the concept of the stumbling block to always have a negative connotation.
- F. However, the Bible makes it clear that there are both legitimate stumbling blocks and non-legitimate stumbling blocks.
- G. When dealing with this issue of stumbling and stumbling blocks, one must identify both the subject (the cause of the stumbling), as well as the object (the one who stumbles).
- H. Due to the Divine Institution of volition (DI#1), each member of the human race is responsible for his own actions. Matt. 18:8-9
- I. Based on this, it will become evident that the one who stumbles is always responsible for and will bear the consequences of his own actions.
- J. However, the one that causes the stumbling may or may not be responsible, based on the nature of the stumbling block in view.

II. Vocabulary.

A. Hebrew vocabulary.

1. כָּשַׁל (kashal), verb, 64X; to stumble, to waver, stagger, or to cause to fall. When followed by a ב (b), it indicates the thing against which one stumbles. The verb is usually used of physical falling, but numbers of times the figurative use of failing or ruin occurs.
 - a. כִּשְׁלוֹן (kishalon), 1X, noun, a stumbling or a fall. Prov. 16:18
 - b. מִכְשׁוֹל (mikshol), 14X; that which anyone stumbles against, a stumbling block, offence.
2. נָגַף (naghaph), verb, to strike or smite, used of the foot striking something that causes one to trip; as above, when followed by a ב (b), it indicates the thing against which one stumbles.
3. נֶגֶף (negheph), noun, 11X, a striking; most often used of a plague or blow delivered by God; it is used once of Messiah, who becomes a stumbling stone. Isa.8:14
4. צָלַע (tsela'), noun, 3X, to stumble or fall down. Ps. 35:15

B. Greek vocabulary.

1. προσκόπτω (proskopto), verb, 8X, to strike upon or against something, to stumble.
 - a. πρόσκομμα (proskomma, noun, 6X, a stumbling block, an obstacle in the way that if struck with the foot causes one to trip or stumble. It is used figuratively for causing someone inner pain, or giving offense.
 - b. προσκοπή (proskope), noun, 1X, an occasion of stumbling, an action that causes another to stumble or trip. IICor. 6:3
 - c. ἀπρόσκοπος (aproskopos), adjective, 3X, in the active sense, it is used of having nothing to strike against; literally, nothing that causes stumbling.
2. πταίω (ptaio), verb, 5X, in a transitive (action of the subject takes a direct object) sense, it means to cause one to stumble or fall; intransitively, to stumble or fall.
3. ἄπταιστος (aptaistos), adjective, 1X, literally, not stumbling, standing firm or securely. Jude 24
4. σκανδαλίζω (skandalizo), verb, 29X, to put a stumbling block in another's way, to cause stumbling.
 - a. σκάνδαλον (skandalon), noun, 15X; literally it is used of the trigger or stick that activates a snare or trap. Figuratively, it is any impediment placed in the way of someone that causes that person to stumble or fall.
 - b. The English term **scandalize** is derived from this family of words; our term has a similar definition, which relates to causing offense by violating another's sensibilities.

III. Definition of description, explaining the relationship between the physical reality of stumbling and stumbling blocks to the spiritual realities.

1. The physical reality of walking around with the potential for striking the foot against some object that is capable of tripping the individual is used to portray similar spiritual realities.
2. Walking is a conscious and deliberate action, which is designed to move one from one place to the other; as such, it implies both motion and progress toward a destination.
3. Walking is an ongoing action common to all normal humans, and so is used in the Bible to indicate a course of life, how one normally behaves or conducts himself.
4. Therefore, it is used to describe the lifestyle of the believer and the unbeliever as well. Eph. 2:2; Phil. 3:17,18
5. Just as stumbling blocks may cause one to strike his foot and trip in the physical realm, even so, certain behaviors may cause others to be offended, and may cause them to stumble in the spiritual realm.
6. The stumbling block is that action or activity that produces a reaction (stumbling or taking offense), which becomes a hindrance to others in their Christian walk, producing the potential for a trip or fall.
7. Sometimes the stumbling block is sinful and it causes those that are positive to stumble; on other occasions, the hindrance is legitimate, and it causes those that are negative to stumble and/or fall.
8. Adjusted believers should be made aware that they might experience something that causes them to stumble (take offense), since there are malicious people that take delight in harming others. Prov. 4:16
9. Likewise, the adjusted believer must be aware that he can cause others to stumble, and seek to minimize or eliminate such activity. Rom. 14:21

IV. Types of stumbling blocks.

A. Legitimate stumbling blocks.

1. There are stumbling blocks that are justifiable; that is, there are things and actions that may cause offense, but the things or actions are not wrong.
2. God the Father has constituted His Son, Jesus Christ, as a stumbling block to those that are negative. Isa. 8:14-15, 28:16; Rom. 9:32-33; Lk. 2:34; 1Cor. 1:23; IPet. 2:7-8
3. God has designed His plan so that Bible doctrine is a stumbling block to believers that are negative. Jn. 6:60-61; Mk. 4:17
4. The cross is a stumbling block to the pride of the legalist, since it removes human merit from consideration. Gal. 5:11, 6:12
5. God, in His perfect righteousness, places stumbling blocks before those that are negative, knowing that they will stumble over them; their stumbling comes about based on their rejection of His plan. Jer. 6:16-21; Jer. 13:15-16

B. Non-legitimate stumbling blocks.

1. There are people and actions that form an impediment to others; that is, these people or their actions are sinful, and cause others to stumble when they otherwise would not.
2. False teachers, and the false doctrine they advocate, are sources of stumbling to those seeking to orient to God's plan. Ezek. 44:10-12; Mal. 2:7-8; Matt. 16:6,12; Rev. 2:14
3. Inconsiderate activity on the part of believers may form a stumbling block to those outside and inside the local church. 1Cor. 10:32-33
4. Thus, believers are to pursue and maintain the good conscience, since this will minimize these potential stumbling blocks. Acts 24:16; 1Tim. 1:5,19; Heb. 13:18; IPet. 3:16
5. The believer may cause himself to stumble by pursuing that which is not compatible with God's plan; he becomes the source of his own stumbling. Ezek. 14:3-4; Matt. 18:8-9
6. The believer should not become involved in making issues out of non-essential things in the Christian way of life, since this can cause the weaker believer to stumble. Rom. 14:13, 20-21; 1Cor. 8:9

V. Reasons people stumble.

- A. Just as a lack of light in the physical realm may cause people to stumble over that which is unseen, the lack of spiritual light (the Divine viewpoint) will result in spiritual stumbling. Prov. 4:18-19; Jn. 11:10; 1Jn. 2:11
- B. Arrogance. Prov. 16:18; Jer. 50:32
- C. Failure under the GAP system, which involves failure to assemble and hear the truth (Jer. 6:19-21), and/or failure to believe and apply the truth. IPet. 2:8
- D. Religious reversionism. Jer. 18:15; Hos. 5:4-5
- E. Becoming overly concerned with the prosperity of those that are negative, arrogant, or wicked. Ps. 73:2-3
- F. Failure for the believer to apply under the principle of love, engaging in bitterness, hatred, strife, or unforgiveness. 1Jn. 2:9-11
- G. Persecution. Jn. 16:1

- VI. God has made provision for the believer, so he need not succumb to stumbling.
- A. God has provided His Word, so that those that are committed to it will be able to avoid stumbling. Ps. 119:165; Prov. 3:21-26
 - B. The adjusted communicator makes certain that those under his charge are aware of the realities of the angelic conflict, so they may avoid stumbling. Jn. 16:1
 - C. Occupation with the realities of the Divine viewpoint (the light) and allowing them to dictate the course of life is a preventative to stumbling. Jn. 11:9-10
 - D. The principle of faith-rest is an important factor in avoiding stumbling and a potential fall; this means that the believer places his trust in the Lord and His abilities, rather than attempting to advance, deliver or vindicate himself. Isa. 40:27-31, 49:23; Prov. 20:22; Ps. 37:34-40
 - E. The doctrine of separation is specifically provided in order to keep the believer's path free of those things, people, or situations that would cause him to stumble. Prov. 4:14-18; ICor. 15:33
- VII. Degrees of stumbling.
- A. Just as one can stumble over something in the physical realm and momentarily lose his balance, so also the believer can have a momentary lapse and be knocked spiritually off balance.
 - B. However, one can stumble, lose their balance, and fall in such a way as to do permanent and irrevocable damage.
 - C. An example of momentary stumbling is found in the Psalms, as the believer gets distracted from God and His plan. Ps. 73
 - 1. The psalmist got his eyes off of the Lord, and began to focus on the type of person that was enjoying great prosperity. Ps. 73:2-3
 - 2. He began to succumb to the human viewpoint that arrogant, wicked men were not subject to the same types of sufferings as positive believers. Ps. 73:4-5
 - 3. Their activities, which disregard God and exploit other people, are apparently executed with impunity (being called into question or challenged). Ps. 73:6-12
 - 4. This believer then began to question the propriety of pursuing God, denying himself, and living a doctrinal lifestyle. Ps. 73:13-15
 - 5. However, when he took his eyes off the temporal realm, and looked at the situation from the Divine viewpoint, he regained his spiritual composure. Ps. 73:17-20
 - 6. Having reconsidered, he recognized that his views had been incorrect; he had only stumbled momentarily. Ps. 73:21-24
 - D. If the believer does not recognize his human viewpoint and deal with it, he may stumble in a more serious fashion. Matt. 26:30-34; Lk. 22:56-62
 - E. In fact, failure to bring doctrine to bear on certain matters may result in a believer stumbling to his own ruin. Lk. 8:13; I Tim. 6:9-10
 - F. In the case of the unbeliever, rejection of Jesus Christ, perpetuated to the point of physical death, produces the ultimate disastrous, permanent fall into the Lake of Fire. Rom. 9:32-33; IPet. 2:6-8
 - G. National discipline, brought on by various forms of evil within the nation, will lead to the fifth cycle of discipline, which is also referred to as stumbling. Ezek. 36:15; Jer. 6:15, 50:29-32
 - H. Therefore, given these potentials, Jesus Christ instructed believers to pray for God to deliver them from any situation that could be potentially catastrophic. Matt. 6:13
- VIII. Concluding observations.

- A. Potential stumbling blocks, such as false teachers, false doctrine, human viewpoint, and persecution, are a daily part of life in this world, and are something common to the life of the positive believer.
- B. Since God created volition, and allows it to function freely in the angelic conflict, He allows stumbling blocks to exist.
- C. However, one should not take this to mean that God approves of those that cause others to stumble inappropriately; the believer must recognize the distinction between what God tolerates (permissive will), and what He sanctions (directive will).
- D. Religious reversionists, as well as unbelieving religious types, are particularly the targets of God's wrath, since they cause so many to stumble. Matt. 23:13-16,23,25,27,29
- E. A special curse is pronounced on anyone (believer or unbeliever) that causes positive volition to stumble. Matt. 18:6-7
- F. Those that are hostile to the positive believer will manifest their true natures when the believer encounters difficulty and stumbles. Ps. 35:15
- G. During Daniel's 70th week, believers will stumble under the intense persecution and their own lack of faith-rest. Matt. 24:10
- H. All unbelievers, as well as the stumbling blocks for which they are responsible, will be removed at the Second Advent. Matt. 13:41
- I. At that time, Israel will also cease to be a stumbling block to itself, as the positive remnant returns to God, and His discipline is removed. Ezek. 36:15
- J. Believers are not to express inordinate joy at the stumbling of their enemies, but are to seek to overcome evil with good. Prov. 24:17-18; Rom. 12:19-21
- K. The truth is personified as stumbling when God's people do not isolate the sin nature and apply Bible doctrine. Isa. 59:9-15; I Tim. 3:15
- L. When believers do not seek the Lord, but continue to engage in their sinful pursuits, their own sins become a stumbling block to them. Ezek. 18:30
- M. The believer can protect himself against stumbling by walking in fellowship and applying love toward others. I Jn. 2:10
- N. The positive believer manifests a tenacity that enables him to survive this world and its multitude of stumbling blocks. Prov. 24:16
- O. God has sufficient power to protect the believer from all stumbling blocks, and deliver the believer safely into His eternal kingdom. Ps. 56:13; Jude 24-25