
LK 7:23 : THE SNARE

No. EE33

John the Baptist is the Messiah's herald. He is an ascetic Nazarene (Num 6:1-21; Mt 11:18-19). His clothes are made of camel's hair, and he lives on locusts and honey. To crown it all, he is a fire and brimstone preacher: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!" (Mt 3:2). The Jews are full of expectation. Liberation has come! And no-one is more excited than the zealous John himself.

But then John lands in gaol for confronting Herod about his sins. No doubt John wrestles in prison with the question: How could God have allowed such a calamity to befall him and take him out of action? Is he going to miss all the excitement of the triumph of the great Messiah?

But what this uncompromising Nazarene finds even harder to accept, is the fact that this Jesus is now reputed to be keeping the company of gluttons, drunkards, tax collectors and sinners! (34).

One can well imagine how he is plagued by doubts as he paces to and fro in his cell. To think how I have sacrificed everything! And He? He is enjoying life! And yet - I saw with my own eyes the Dove descending on Him, and I heard the voice saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Mt 3:16-17).

Finally John cannot take it any longer. He sends a few of his disciples to Jesus with the question: "Are you the one ...?" (20). Jesus' reply is simple but says it all: "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor" (22). Who would know better than John that this is the fulfilment of the Messianic prophecies in Isa 35:5-6 and 61:1?

And then, as they walk off, the Lord Jesus calls after them: "And blessed is the one who is not offended by me!" (23, ESV).

Technical

The word that Jesus uses here, translated by "offended", is quite meaningful [Gr. *skandalidzo* (the verb); *skandalon* (the noun)].

In Classical Greek it has the connotation of being caught in a trap or snare. The noun is used for the stick that triggers the trap when the animal or bird steps on it.¹ In the New Testament the verb means *to cause to stumble* or *to offend* (active voice) and *to stumble* or *to take offence* (passive voice). Used as a noun it has the meaning of a *stumbling-block* or *an offence*.

I have no axe to grind with modern translations, but in order to properly understand and apply Jesus' warning, we need to apply a little imagination and exegetical freedom. I would paraphrase Lk 7:23 as follows: *Blessed is the man who does not land up in a trap on account of My words or actions!*

Jesus' message to John is therefore: *It is terrible for you to suffer in that cell of stone, but be careful that you do not land in a cell that is far worse - one of an emotional and spiritual kind. Then you will indeed be helpless, like an animal or bird in a snare!*"

It has happened to others

The very thing against which Jesus is warning John does, in fact, happen to many. They land in a snare as a result of Jesus' words and actions.

In the little town of Nazareth, where Jesus grew up, the people were amazed at His wisdom. But because of His humble background they refused to accept His teaching. "And they took offence (Gr. *skanalidzo*) at him." (Mt 13:57) - which elicited

2. Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol 2, p.707.

Jesus' well-known response, "Only in his home town and in his own house is a prophet without honour." Except for His brothers, who came to believe in Him after the resurrection, and perhaps a few others, the people of Nazareth never escaped from the snare!

In Mt 15 the Lord Jesus warns the Jews about their hypocrisy. Because of this they take offence (Gr. *skanalidzo*; v. 12). The Scribes and Pharisees also never escaped from the snare!

In Jn 6 our Lord preaches about God's sovereignty in salvation, His forthcoming crucifixion, and the necessity of believing in Him as the crucified Saviour. Again many take offence (Gr. *skanalidzo*; v. 61) and turn their backs on Him. In all probability very few of them ever escaped from the snare!

Peter's offence

Is escape from the snare of offence possible? Only if God in his mercy frees you! Peter learnt this from experience. In Mt 26:31 the Lord Jesus uses the same word as He warns his disciples that they would that very night "fall away" from Him. Peter reacts with indignation, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will" (v. 33). Jesus assures him that he will not only take offence, but will also taste the bitter fruits of betrayal - before the cock crows, he will disown his Lord three times.

And so it transpires. Peter feels let down and humiliated by everything that happens. Why did Jesus in His omnipotence not destroy his enemies? Why did He humiliate him when he pulled his sword (Jn 18:10-11)? Peter's devotion to Jesus finally drops so low that he betrays Him. Then the cock crows - and Peter is devastated (Mt 26:75).

It is possible to escape, however

We are all familiar with the emotions that come with failure. Peter is crushed by feelings of guilt and self-reproach. He is a dismal failure as a disciple! All that remains for him is to return to his occupation as a fisherman. At least that is something he is good at!

The others join him. They sail out, possibly in the same boat that Peter abandoned three years before. But they fail to catch a single fish! (Jh 21:3).

The following morning Jesus stands on the shore and shouts, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" (the Greek text of Jn 21:5 betrays a note of amusement in the question). "Throw your net on the right side of the boat!", He then shouts. They do so and catch more fish than they can handle (6).

All of the disciples, but Peter in particular, needed to learn that when the Lord calls on you to leave your boat and nets, He means what He says.

If you desert your calling - and if the Lord has mercy on you - things will keep on going wrong, until you repent. But once you turn back, He will bless you again and provide all your needs.

The following verses then describe in a moving way Peter's restoration (Jn 21:15-17). His calling is to be a shepherd of the Lord's flock, no matter how big a failure he considers himself to be. In fact, this knowledge of his weakness is exactly the right medicine to prepare him for what lies ahead. The Lord does not work through the arrogant. His power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12:9-10).

What does Jesus actually do in Jn 21? *He removes Peter from the snare of offence at the Lord!* And He does so with wonderful tenderness. It makes one think of a boy removing a bird from underneath a trap with such care that he can feel the frightened bird's beating heart under his fingers.

Jesus' words, "Follow Me", (19) signalled Peter's final release. The Lord had not rejected him! And we know how fruitful the years that followed were. How Peter benefited from his experience in the snare!

What about you?

We all face snares from time to time. We are confronted with something that the Lord does or does not do; with what He tells us or does not tell us. There are thousands of disillusioned Christians, captives of their offence at the Lord - simply because He failed to live up to their expectations!

They were going to do great things for Him, but then their world collapsed about them. A loved one died a horrible or untimely death. They were diagnosed with a terminal disease. Someone else was healed after prayer, while they themselves only got worse. They have friends with four children while they remain childless. One of their children has a mental or physical handicap. They firmly believed that they were being guided by the Holy Spirit, but it all came to nothing. They have been the victim of unscrupulous "prophets". They have started with a full-time ministry, but are struggling to survive. The church and its leaders have failed them.

People caught in these sort of snares accuse God of double standards, but forget that James was beheaded (Acts 12:2), while Peter was freed (Acts 12:7-10); that Stephen was stoned (Acts 7:59), while Paul was resurrected, as it were (Acts 14:19-20).

How many Christians have started backsliding after being caught in the snare? Many of them still keep up appearances, but their hearts are no longer with the Lord. They do not trust Him any more. They are spiritually dead. All that remains is for the machines of religion and tradition to be switched off.

Are you helplessly caught in a web? Listen! It pleases the Lord to set people free. Therefore, come and bow in total worship and subjection before Him. He is your Creator and therefore your sovereign Owner. He is all-wise and you can trust Him. If you are in Christ, He will work for the good everything in your life - good and bad (Rm 8:28-30).

Humble yourself, therefore, under God's mighty hand (1Pt 5:6), surrender yourself, bow in acceptance, entrust yourself to the loving One Who knows best. He is the Potter, you are the clay. He often treats those He favours as He did the Baptist and Peter. And whether you are a Stephen or a Paul, always let your attitude be that of Daniel's friends: "... the God we serve is able to save us from (the blazing furnace), and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. *But even if he does not ... we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up*" (Dn 3:17-18).

My friend, as in the case of Peter, the Lord Jesus is calling you to follow Him. Forget what is behind and strain towards what is ahead (Ph 3:13).

The Rock of stumbling

One final truth is of vital importance. In Rm 9:32-33 Christ is called "a stone that causes men to stumble". This was especially true of the Jews. Why? Because He is the crucified one (1Cor 1:23; Gl 5:11). What is this saying to us? Christ is a stumbling-stone particularly to the religious - those who consider their good works to be a stepladder to heaven. To them the cross is an insult, because it tells them that they have nothing in themselves to offer God. As a result, the gospel of God's free grace lands them in a snare!

Never forget this: God saves sinners - spiritual beggars, lost sons, tax collectors. Therefore, do you know in your heart of hearts that as far as your own merit is concerned, you stand in utter condemnation before God - and that Christ is your only hope? This is a non-negotiable prerequisite for eternal life.

The Bible offers no comfort to the proud and the self-righteous. But to sinners there is an open invitation: "Come! Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life" (Rev 22:17).

Flee into Christ! Hide in Him for life and death!

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