

The Stumbling Block of Iniquity

Certain elders of Israel came to the prophet Ezekiel seeking direction and guidance from the Lord. These men were not like many of the Israelites, who openly bowed their knees to idols. No, you wouldn't find these elders in some idol temple, offering sacrifices to the false gods there. They were leaders of the people -- and they wanted to appear before everyone as godly men.

But inside, these elders were white as sepulchres! Outwardly, they had the appearance of men who had a heart for God and wanted to know his word for their lives. And that is the manner in which they approached Ezekiel.

Yet God revealed to Ezekiel what was in their hearts. He said to the prophet, "*Son of man, these men have set up idols in their heart...*" (EZ 14:3). The Lord was saying, "These men have come to you saying they want to hear a word from Me -- that they want to walk in obedience to My commands. But they are lying. They have secret sins in their life!"

These elders all had a hidden, secret idolatry. Their hearts were in bondage to sins they indulged behind closed doors. No one could tell this by their appearances. On the contrary, they came across not as pagans or idol worshipers, but as respected men of God going about their ministries.

The idol of one elder might have been different from that of another. For some, it might have been a lust for recognition, a drive for power. For others, it might have been some secret pleasure of the flesh. Others might have clung to a compromising relationship -- an adulterous affair or homosexual

sin. But with each of them, a war raged in their souls. They were caught in two powerful cross-currents: On one side they wanted to hear from God -- and on the other, their hidden idol rose up before their eyes.

**A Stumbling Block of Iniquity Is
Any Evil Thing That Hinders
Your Spiritual Progress --
Anything That Stands Between
You and God!**

Such a stumbling block is any evil enticement that robs you of a steadfast walk with God. It is any besetting sin that causes you to waver in your faith...any desire that brings shame to your heart and to the name of Christ...any secret thing that excites you, giving you false hope...any sin you cling to as you come to the Lord seeking guidance. **You can come to God's house, raise your hands, worship him loudly -- and yet still have a stumbling block of iniquity in your heart!**

"(They) have set up their idols in their heart, and put the stumblingblock of their iniquity before their face..." (EZ 14:3). God was telling Ezekiel, "These men have been captivated in their hearts by a secret sin. And their sin is before their very eyes. It is something known to them. They

know clearly what has hold of their heart, because I have dealt with them about it. I have convicted them by My spirit -- and they know exactly what is hindering their fellowship with Me.

"These are My chosen people, elders of My church -- and they know better! They don't have to have a word from you to figure it all out. They know I hate idolatry. And they know of David's warning: **'If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.'** But these men are not ready to forsake their sinful addiction. They are not ready to admit they are deceived, and to face correction. Yet, still, they expect me to speak to them!"

The book of Malachi tells us that priests wept in God's house night and day, covering the altar with their tears. But those men had treachery in their hearts against their wives; they were divorcing their spouses left and right. And for that reason God did not hear their cries. **Beloved, you can cry a river of tears -- but if you hold onto an idol in your heart, the Lord will not hear you!**

God asked Ezekiel, "*...should I be enquired of at all by them?*" (same verse). In other words: "Do these elders really believe they can inquire of Me, while holding fast to a secret idol? Do they expect Me

to ignore what is in their hearts, and answer their requests in truth and righteousness? These idolaters are not prepared to hear My word. They're not ready to do what I tell them. Why would I speak to them?"

Any Believer Who Clings to a Secret Sin, or Anything Contrary to God's Word, Cannot Hear the True Voice of God!

Anyone who holds fast to a sin will never accept truth when he hears it. Why? It is because every idol carries with it a lie that will be accepted as truth!

When the Holy Spirit convicts a believer of a particular sin or habit, he comes again and again with loving warnings. God's Spirit is tender, patient, loving -- and He will wait for a believer to respond before He brings discipline. He will continually hammer that person's compromise with His convicting word.

But when all the woosings and warnings of the Spirit are ignored and sin takes root, the penalty is chastising, and finally judgment. God will allow a blinding of the eyes and a hardness of the heart. And at that point, **it becomes impossible for the habitual sinner to see his own depravity.** Eventually, if these awful judgments are not received, the hardness of heart becomes impenetrable.

Saul's heart was under the dominion of the idols of pride and jealousy. Pride continually rose up in this man, making him jealous of David and anyone else who walked in holiness. Saul's heart was overcome with his idolatry.

The Bible tells us Saul went to the Lord time after time to inquire of Him, but God refused to speak to him. The Lord might have said to Saul what He said to the elders who came to Ezekiel: "Shall I be inquired of by one whose heart is blinded by pride and overt rebellion?"

Here is the sad testimony of this idolatrous king: *"...And Saul answered, I am sore distressed...God is departed from me, and answereth me no more, neither by prophets, nor by dreams..."* (1.SAM 28:15). Saul could weep, he could seek out

prophets, he could pray for dreams -- but the Lord answered, "No, Saul. I'm not talking to you anymore -- because your heart is captivated by an idol!"

God didn't speak to Saul again for the rest of his life. At one point, the distraught king consorted with a witch to try to find a clear word. In the end, he died in utter terror.

The book of Jeremiah tells us that Ephraim fell under the Lord's severe chastisements because of sin. But Ephraim repented, turning away from his idols and smashing them. Here is that man's testimony: *"Surely after that I was turned, I repented; and after that I was instructed..."* (JER 31:19).

Do you understand what Ephraim is saying here? In essence, it is this: "When I had idols in my heart, I went to the Lord for instructions. But I couldn't get a word from heaven. I didn't hear anything from God -- until I repented and smashed my idols to bits. Then I got clear instructions!"

Only by turning away from your idol in wholehearted repentance can you hear the true word of the Lord -- receiving clear, divine guidance. You see, when you repent, the first thing that returns to you is your discernment, the very wisdom of God. And the farther behind you leave your sin, the clearer you will see and hear. God's voice will become distinct, sure, with the authority of truth.

But Christians who seek God while clinging to an idol will never hear any voice -- except the voice of their own heart! Indeed, their own desire will take on a voice -- and eventually those believers will begin to believe it is the voice of God.

Beloved, if you refuse to forsake a bosom sin, you need not try to fast. Your efforts will all be in vain. God says, *"(Your) iniquities testify against (you)...When they fast, I will not hear their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and an oblation, I will not accept them..."* (14:7, 12).

Worse yet is this word: If you come to the Lord while coddling a stumbling block of iniquity, God will not refuse you. He will answer your prayer. But the word you receive will be alarming, fearful: *"...I the Lord will answer him that cometh*

according to the multitude of his idols" (EZ 14:4).

For example: Israel came to God clamoring for a king. Their hearts were filled with a lust to be like other nations, and that became their idol. So, **God answered them according to their lust: "I gave thee a king in mine anger, and took him away in my wrath"** (HOS 13:11).

God said, "Yes, I will answer your prayer. But I know the lust that has captivated your heart. I know you won't listen to any word I give you. So I'm going to answer you according to your heart's desire. I'm going to give you what you want -- until you are sick of it!"

When the people crowned Saul king, they thought, "God has heard us. He has answered our prayers. Isn't it wonderful? The Lord is with us!" But God had answered them in his anger -- according to their idolatrous hearts!

In the Wilderness, the Children of Israel Inquired of the Lord, Begging for Flesh to Eat.

Again, the people's hearts were full of idolatry and unbelief. And again, God answered them according to their lust:

"And while the flesh was yet between their teeth, ere it was chewed, the wrath of the Lord was kindled against the people, and the Lord smote the people with a very great plague" (NUM 11:33).

God did not disappoint them. He gave them the meat they desired. And while the people were gorging on it, they thought, "God has heard us. He is pleased with us!" No -- God had only responded to their idolatry! And while the meat was still in their mouths, the people began dying.

Beloved, God answers us according to our idols! He warns: "Yes, you will get what you crave. You have pampered your lust. But it will cost you everything!"

Balaam was offered a great sum of money, along with great prestige and honor, by the Midianites -- if he would only curse the children of Israel. When Balaam sought God about the matter, the Lord gave him an emphatic "No."

So the ambassadors of Midian came back with a better offer of even greater enticements. Again, Balaam went to the Lord, asking, "God, you heard the offer. Shall I go?" But this time Balaam inquired with a heart that was aflame with desire. He had a lust for power, for financial gain, for recognition. He would not lay down his idol of covetousness -- and it became a stumbling block of iniquity in his heart!

What was God's answer to Balaam? **"Rise up and go with them!"** The Lord answered Balaam according to the desire that had captured his heart. You see, Balaam didn't want God's will; he didn't want to walk in purity. He wanted his own will -- which was personal gain. Yet as he rode along, he thought, "I have the mind of God on this."

No! Balaam was tragically mistaken. He had become the object of God's anger, because he'd sold out to the power of lust. And it became a curse to him: Balaam was destroyed with the rest of God's enemies.

Not long ago, a Christian husband came to me to inform me he was leaving his wife. He said, in essence, "Our marriage is hopeless. It has brought me only misery. So now I'm getting out."

"I know you'll tell me I'm wrong -- that this is unscriptural. But I've really prayed about it. And the Lord has told me he doesn't expect me to live with that kind of hurt. He told me leaving is the right thing under the circumstances. So, I don't care what you say -- because I'm at peace about it."

Did this man hear from God? Oh, yes -- God answered his prayer, all right. He answered him according to the idols in his heart. God allowed the desire in his heart to take on a voice!

Years ago, a young minister came to me weeping. He confessed to me that he had been carrying on an affair for five years with a young woman in his church. He explained it this way: "My marriage was difficult, because my wife misunderstood me. But this other sister was very spiritual. We built each other up in the Lord. That's how it all started."

"At first, I wept as I had never wept in my life. God really dealt with me. But then it began to feel all right. Suddenly, I was preaching better than ever. And the church began to grow. Whenever I prayed about my relationship with this woman, all I heard in response was, 'God understands. He knows how hurt you are. It's all right -- because one day she'll be your wife.'"

God answered the man's prayer -- by answering his idol! That young preacher heard what he wanted to hear. But then God suddenly exposed the lie of it all -- and the cost was almost unbearable for him.

Any idol that is harbored becomes a stumbling block of iniquity in the heart. You may say you're close to Jesus, that you have communion with Him. But if you are clinging to an idol, there can be no such communion. As God told Ezekiel, "These elders are estranged, separated from Me, because of their idolatry. Their idols have blocked all communion with Me!"

"Therefore say unto the house of Israel, Thus saith the Lord God; Repent, and turn yourselves from your idols; and turn away your faces from all your abominations" (EZ 14:6). In Hebrew, the word for "abomination" means "your disgusting things" -- that is, all those things that disgust the Holy Spirit.

God is saying, in short: "Do you want to inquire of me and receive a true word? I've had enough of your phony tears, your fake repentance. Turn away from your idols. Then I will answer you in truth!"

Those Who Refuse to Cast down Their Stumbling Block of Iniquity -- Who Refuse to Acknowledge Their Idols and Smash Them -- End Up in Strong Delusion!

Idolaters are destined to live in deception -- believing a lie to be the truth!

"For every one of the house of Israel, or of the stranger that sojourneth in Israel, which separated himself from me, and setteth up his idols in his heart, and putteth the stumblingblock of his iniquity before his face, and cometh to a prophet to enquire of him concerning me; I the Lord will answer him by himself."

"And I will set my face against that man, and will make him a sign and a proverb, and I will cut him off from the midst of my people; and ye shall know that I am the Lord. And if the prophet be deceived when he hath spoken a thing, I the Lord have deceived that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand upon him, and will destroy him from the midst of my people Israel" (EZ 14:7-9).

God says in this passage that He deceives covetous prophets. Yet we know God cannot deceive any man. Rather, what this means is, **"Because you are hardened in your sin, with no cry or desire to turn and repent, every word you hear from now on will confirm you in your sin. Even the preaching you hear will speak to your idols. Everything will confirm you in your deception!"**

We see a picture of this in 1 Kings 22, with King Ahab. This man was probably the most idolatrous king in the history of Israel. And at this time, he had aligned himself with King Jehoshaphat to go into battle against Ramoth-Gilead.

Four hundred prophets stood before Ahab, encouraging him to move forward with the attack. Can you imagine the scene? There stood a horde of flattering men, all mouthing words that fed Ahab's idolatry. And every one of those four hundred voices was lying to him -- confirming him in his sin, telling him it was okay to move ahead.

But listen to what Scripture says:

"And the Lord said, Who shall persuade Ahab, that he may go up and fall [be defeated] at Ramoth-gilead? And one said on this manner, and another said on that manner. And there came forth a spirit, and stood before the Lord, and said, I will persuade him. And the Lord said unto him, Wherewith? And he said, I will go forth, and I will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets. And he said, Thou shalt persuade him, and prevail also: go forth, and do so" (1.KIN 22:20-22).

Here was one of the worst idolaters of all time, a man whose heart was absolutely captivated by covetousness and lust. And now he was inquiring of the Lord. So, what did God give to Ahab? He provided him with four hundred

prophets who would echo the desire in Ahab's heart: "Everything looks great. There is peace, prosperity ahead. Go into battle!"

What a horrible tragedy! Ahab couldn't hear God's voice because of the idols rooted in his heart. And God answered him by sending him a strong delusion -- one that would destroy him!

"...because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved...for this cause [reason] God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: that they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (2.THES 2:10-12).

God not only allows deceptive voices, but he actually arranges them: *"...God shall send them strong delusion..."* (verse 11). I see this happen often in Christians' lives. For example, one man left Times Square Church recently because he said the sermons were too hard and legalistic. But this man had an idol - - a besetting sin that he wouldn't let go. He felt "led" to a church where he is comfortable in his sin. Now he can smoke and drink freely -- and not a word is ever said about it.

I have often wondered how it is that fleshly Christians in the church seem to find others just like themselves. I see gossipers making friends with other gossipers; lust-filled women gravitating to men who are on the prowl; homosexuals finding other homosexuals. How are they "led" to each other? It is all ordained of God!

No, God does not overpower anyone's free will. But His work of sending a strong delusion happens because people refuse to forsake their evil practices. He says, "The only hope I have of reaching you is to let you come to the end of your rope -- to let your sin make you sick!"

We see this process at work in the book of Numbers, when Israel wept and pleaded for meat. God answered their prayers this way: *"Ye shall not eat one day, nor two days, nor five days, neither ten days, nor twenty days; but even a whole month, until it come out at your nostrils: because that ye have*

despised the Lord which is among you..." (NUM 11:19-20).

God is saying, "So, you want to indulge your flesh? You want to hold onto your sin? Then I will let you wallow in it until it sickens you, until it gives you no more pleasure -- until you cry out, 'Enough!'"

Many Christians Turn to the Bible to Inquire of the Lord While Still Clinging to Stumbling Blocks of Iniquity -- and Even the Scriptures Speak to Their Idols!

When idolaters open the Bible, they often find what they want, right before their eyes. They read just what they needed to lift conviction, to put them at ease -- to confirm them in their delusion!

A number of years ago, a married man came to me convinced God had shown him a woman who would be his next wife. His present wife was disabled. This man told me, "I love my wife, and I have no plans to leave her. But a voice keeps telling me that this other sister is going to be my wife one day. I know it sounds hard to believe -- but whenever I open my Bible I receive confirmations, everywhere I turn. For example -- the other day I turned to Psalms, and the word I read was, 'He will bring you into your desired haven.'"

That word should have been proof enough to this man that in his heart this other woman was a "desired haven." The words he was receiving weren't prophetic at all; they were his own lustful desire being given a voice! This man was being "led" to scriptures that were misapplied -- and they confirmed him in his strong delusion.

It is one thing to have a struggle with sin and refuse to make peace with it. Such a person says, "I hate this bondage -- and I will not put up with it! I want deliverance. God, I will stay true to You!"

But when you make peace with your sin -- when it is in your face every day, yet you refuse to see it - - you will begin to hear one confirmation after another. And it will not be God's word to you -- but God allowing your own sinful heart to speak!

When Christians learn to live with their sin -- whether that sin is

unforgiveness, gossip, sensuality - - the sin eventually becomes a part of their life. And no matter how often they are seen in church -- with hands upraised, worshipping the Lord -- they remain idolaters in God's eyes. And eventually God will remove His anointing from them completely.

Are you clinging to an idol in your heart? Be warned -- all you will ever receive from God's Word is confirmation in deception. The word meant to heal you will only bring you ruin. You will be led by the spirit of your idol -- perverting everything you read or hear!

God's Word Shows Us Why He Has to Take Such Drastic Action -- Why He Must Answer Idolaters So Harshly!

"And they shall bear the punishment of their iniquity: the punishment of the prophet shall be even as the punishment of him that seeketh unto him; that the house of Israel may go no more astray from me, neither be polluted any more with all their transgressions; but that they may be my people, and I may be their God, saith the Lord God" (EZ 14:10-11).

God is telling us in tender terms: "Whatever it takes to get you away from your polluted idol, I'm going to do it. I will not let you fall into deception and destruction. I am going to woo you back to myself!"

"If that doesn't work, I will bring punishment if I have to. I will bring the hammer of My Word down upon you. I will chasten you and judge you. And I will do it all because I love you and don't want to lose you! I have come to give you life more abundantly. But you can't have that abundance as long as you hold onto that idol in your heart!"

"...when ye see their ways and their doings...ye shall know that I have not done without cause all that I have done in it, saith the Lord God" (verse 23). The Lord is saying, in other words: "You'll know that my strong dealings with you are for a reason. I simply will not let you go!"

I ask you: Do you have a stumbling block of iniquity in your heart? Are you under the dominion of a besetting sin? Are you deceived by a bondage that could destroy you?

If so, and you find yourself under conviction from this message, there is hope for you.

It doesn't matter what your idol is -- covetousness, sexual sin, pornography, alcohol, drugs, bitterness or unforgiveness. God says it is before your face right now -- and you know what it is. Ask Him to open your eyes to it; seek Him for a revelation about your sin.

Ask the Holy Spirit to instill the fear of God in you -- to soften your heart to His convicting word and voice. You have to

hate your sin -- to determine to make no peace with it!

Cry out to him now: "Lord, don't leave me blind! If there is any delusion or deception in me, expose it. Bring the sledgehammer of Your Word to smash down all my walls of deception. Get through to me. I don't want to believe any more lies. I only want to hear Your voice now. I want Your power and authority to rule my life!"

There is deliverance for you, if you truly want it. But God will wait for you to turn away from your idols. He will empower you by His Spirit

the moment you are ready to surrender them.

Dear saint, hear me well: If you will lay down your idols today, God will begin to reveal Himself to you in a special way. And one day soon you will look at your feet and see those lifeless idols lying beneath you in ashes and powder. Then you will realize you've been walking in Jesus' wonderful presence -- no longer a slave to a bondage, but a child of God set free by truth!

by David Wilkerson
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