

The Wicked Stumbling in Their Darkness

Charles G. Finney:

"The way of the wicked is as darkness; they know not at what they stumble." Proverbs 4:19

The older I grow, the more I admire and love the book of Proverbs. Its wisdom is most profound. Manifestly these proverbs are the result, not of inspiration only, but of much observation and reflection in the writer. They are useful, being easily remembered, and so various, that you can always find something to apply, be your circumstances what they may. It is plain the author had moved among men with his eyes wide open. Hence, he had noticed that the wicked are forever stumbling, and seem not to know at what they stumble. It is to this great truth that I now call your attention.

I. It is well, in the first place, to notice several facts of human consciousness.

Whoever shall carefully study these facts, shown by human consciousness, must see that the pretended skepticism of men is mere hypocrisy. Men know better.

What are these facts?

1. In any moral agent, the spirit of living to one's self, as distinguished from living for others, is sin. Every moral agent knows this because his irresistible convictions affirm it.
2. Consciousness affirms that the way of the wicked is one of self-will. For, to make the promotion of one's own interests the chief end of life is self-will. Self-will and nothing else prompts and pushes men to this. And, in respect to this point, it matters not whether the interests sought to be promoted are temporal or eternal--those pertaining to time, or those which reach forward into eternity.
3. Sinners are alienated from God. God is cast out of their regard. They scarcely think of him, and never, with the reverence, love, and trust, which are his due. Every sinner knows this, because his own consciousness affirms it.
4. Yet, even in this fearfully wicked course, they seek to justify themselves. Consequently, they are tempted to be very uncandid; nay, more--not only tempted, but if they will persist in their sin, compelled. They cannot justify themselves, and still be fair-minded. The truth is all against them; so that it must make them ceaseless trouble if they consent to see things as they are.

Of course, this leads to great blindness. The Bible represents sinners as being blinded by sin; you can now see how this must certainly result. When men take a false position towards God, the truth annoys them terribly; it becomes entirely essential to their quiet in such a position, that they should see things, not as they are, but as they are not;--so that they are led on to pervert the truth, and blind their own eyes. Such a result from such causes, is by no means peculiar to religion. It takes place just as certainly and palpably in politics, and there, we may see it any day. When men resign their opinion to the control of self-will, they, of course, become uncandid, and thus blinded. This is a simple matter of fact, coming within the pale of consciousness.

Such men become filled with prejudice. They try to seek some refuge of lies. They get up excuses--which yet are no excuses, and they inwardly know it. Yet, suppressing all notice of this inward knowledge, they manage to make themselves almost believe in the validity of these excuses--this being the only way in which they can live any way comfortably in their sins. It is remarkable that a sinner will bring himself with great ease to accept some delusion; a single suggestion suffices often, and he does not trouble himself about the evidence. "The wish is farther to the thought."

The Bible says of the wicked, that "their way is as darkness." It is as if one was groping along, in the dead of a night, starless and rayless; he feels his way; he stumbles and knows not at what. He cannot see things as they really are. Such is the way of the wicked.

His self-will prevents him from coming to the light. "Every one that doeth evil, hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, because his deeds are evil."

The control of self-will and self-interest ensures profound misapprehension. Those of you who observe the errors and prejudices of politicians, are often amazed. It shocks you to see what absurd positions they can

take, and with what facility they can utterly distort the truth, and yet make it seem to their eyes to be truth yet. Of late, I do not pretend to believe the party papers. Let them say what they please, I know there is no confidence to be reposed in either their facts or their opinions. So, on any subject, let a man become committed to a party, and that moment he becomes the victim of prejudice. If you had fallen in with the members returning from the National Democratic Convention, you would have been surprised to see how differently from yourselves they view the great questions of the day. Are they right? No; they are committed, and, by consequence, prejudiced. So, on any side of any question, men committed under some selfish influence, are sure to be misled.

When the Bible says of the wicked--"They know not at what they stumble," it assumes that they do stumble and fall. Of course, this refers, not to the body, but to the soul. Misled as to their relations and attitude towards God, they stumble and fall into eternal perdition.

They stumble--they know not at what. They are in no state to see. They have enveloped their own minds in deep darkness. How can they discriminate? All the effort they put forth for this purpose, while in this state of self-will, is vain. They will not adjust and weigh the evidence fairly. All their trying is likely to avail nothing, unless they shall really cut loose from their committal--sunder the bonds that hold their minds under the sway of prejudice, and let in the light of truth upon their own souls. In fact, until they do this they do not try to see the truth, in any proper sense. They might see the truth easily if their minds were in an upright and honest state.

II. I am now about to state in detail some of the things over which sinners stumble. Let me beg of you, as I name these points, to note their bearings on your own experience.

1. Sinners stumble at their own ignorance. Often they are amazingly ignorant--of God, of his attributes; of their own relations to God, and indeed, of themselves. It is amazing to hear the things they say, and the conclusions to which they come. Yet they seem not at all aware that they are stumbling at their own ignorance. A young man of skeptical views, who came here some years since, said to me, in answer to some question of mine in regard to his spiritual state--"I do not take the same views of Christianity that you do." What, said I, what does this imply? It must imply either that you have given more attention to the subject than I have, or more able thinking, or that you are more honest. Yet, when he came to bring out his own view, any body could see that he was stumbling over his own ignorance. He had, as he thought, got bravely over the prejudices of his godly father; had broken off all the trammels that hold the professors here; in fact, so profound was his ignorance, he seemed not to have comprehended the first thing pertaining to the subject. Just as you sometimes see persons talking very large and wise on other subjects, when every word they say, shows their ignorance to be most profound; so it is here.

In like manner, sinners stumble over the ignorance of others. They follow leaders who mislead them, and cause them to stumble over themselves into destruction.

2. They stumble over their own foolish and wicked prejudices. It is impossible to be wicked without being prejudiced. Usually, men are not well aware of the depth and power of these prejudices. Hence, under this influence they are the more surely led on to ruin.

This principle is true on political as well as on religious subjects; and, indeed, on any and all subjects.

3. Sinners stumble over their own enmity against God. Through neglect to notice their own consciousness, and through neglect of God, they do not admit the fact of their being at enmity with God, and consequently fail to account for many things in their own history as they might. Indeed, they often assume themselves to be friendly to God and to religion, while really there is the deepest enmity in their hearts. Hence, no wonder that, under such a delusion, they become fearfully blinded, and stumble into perdition.

Often sinners misunderstand and pervert sermons and the truths they teach, because of their own bad state of mind. The enmity of their hearts boils up, and its fumes becloud their mental vision.

4. They stumble over their own dishonest state of mind. They are uncandid and dishonest towards God, and this constantly perverts their views. They say that when they read the Bible, they cannot understand it. Reason; lack of an honest mind. They stumble at God's character, providence and dealings with men--all because they are not in a state of mind to see and judge fairly. When they read the Bible, they are forever looking after its discrepancies and its difficulties, and they find almost nothing else there. Now, the Bible is so written that a dishonest mind can make for itself any amount of difficulty with it. The explanation of this fact is, that the sacred writers were so eminently honest and simple-hearted, they wrote right on as men who take no pains to

avoid being misunderstood. Honest themselves, it does not seem to occur to them that any of their readers will be otherwise. The Bible is, in style, utterly unlike the documents of diplomacy. A man who remembers that his words are to be quizzed and sifted, will take care for the one construction which shall answer for one emergency, and, perhaps, also, for other constructions, to meet other emergencies. A crafty writer looks out in all directions. Honest men, like apostles and prophets, never trouble themselves about cavillers.

Hence, cavillers against the Bible abuse that model of beautiful simplicity--to their own damnation. They can do this if they choose, and they choose to do so because they love darkness and not light. The Bible is particularly open to perversion, so that, if men are dishonest, they will almost certainly misunderstand it. If you talk with Universalists, you will be amazed to see how they can swallow down the greatest absurdities, and the most monstrous lies and delusions, taught them by their ministers. No matter how hard and tough it may be, they seem to have a capacity equal to it--their hearts going before and creating an appetite for this doctrine.

5. They stumble over their own unbelief. Their want of confidence in God leads them to misinterpret his providence; to question its universal goodness, and to misunderstand his works and ways. Now, it is in the nature of the case impossible for God to explain all his conduct to his creatures as he goes along, so that they can understand all he does. Hence, the natural necessity for faith, and hence, if you have not faith in his goodness, you are stumbled. Take, for instance, the existence of American slavery. It certainly exists under God's government. Not that he has ordained, in the sense of commanding or approving it; but he has suffered it to exist. Now, suppose you infer from this that God is tyrannical and cruel. This inference would only show your want of confidence in God's providence. It would not, by any means, show that God is doing wrong. So sinners stumble at what God does or omits to do. Suppose your children have no confidence in you. Unless you explain everything, they are stumbled, and think hard of your course. They must see through all your plans and approve them all, or they cry out against you. Would not you think this horrible?

Sinners are often stumbled through their sheer aversion to God. They cannot bear to admit that he is as holy, just, and good, as he truly is. If they were willing to believe this, it would be easy enough. Just as when you are greatly prejudiced against a neighbor, and hear much good said of him, you will be likely to reply, "I can't believe that." Yet the reason why you cannot lies not in the man, or in the evidence, but in your own prejudice. You might perhaps say--There is so much counter evidence, I cannot believe it;--but really the force of this counter evidence lies only in your own prejudice. So with the sinner; the root of the difficulty is that he is so alienated from God, that he cannot bear to think well of him.

6. They stumble also over their own uncharitableness. You meet thousands who are stumbling over what they are pleased to call the faults of professors. Now the fact is, that ordinarily by far the greatest part of all that is said against Christians is untrue. If you search out these charges, you find but a lean foundation, often, for the gravest part of them. I have found it so in cases almost without number. Sinners will tell you gravely that they are greatly stumbled against the things they hear of Christians; when the fact is, they would give no credit to such stories on equal evidence, yet bearing against friends. That is, they believe them only because they are prejudiced against Christians. They hate God's people, and are eager to catch up any scandal against them. One instance in point occurred not long since where I was laboring. A brother whom I had long known, I found was generally spoken of with disrespect. It was said he was dishonest in his business. I determined to enquire into the case; did so, and found this report false, and that report false, and indeed could not track down any of the reports to a valid foundation. I then went to those brethren in the church who had been circulating these reports, and said to them, Do you know those evil reports to be true? "No." Have you carried these reports to that injured brother, for his explanation? "No." Then, said I, you ought to be turned out of the church, every man of you, for slandering your brother.

In the same way the uncharitableness of others becomes an occasion of stumbling to sinners. They hear others speak uncharitably, and they believe it because it falls in so entirely with their own tendencies of mind.

This uncharitableness is one of the most fruitful sources of stumbling to the souls of men. Just think how much sinners influence each other to uncharitableness, and turn each other away from God.

7. Some stumble over a false hope. Suppose it to be a minister of the gospel. If he holds fast to his false hope, it will almost inevitably shape his views of Christian experience. Taking himself to be a Christian, and judging what piety is by his own experience, all his notions are modified accordingly. Hence, he will not only stumble himself, but others also. He tells his Christian friends that they cannot expect to make this or that attainment in this life. Inevitably he will lower down the standard of the Christian life. I have now in mind the case of a pastor who invited a brother to preach in his pulpit. The latter preached to Christians that they ought not to stop short of being fully conscious of loving God; that religion was a matter of consciousness, and hence, if they were not

conscious of its presence and power in their souls, they ought to conclude they know nothing of it.

After he had gone, this pastor set himself earnestly to fritter all these ideas away. He told his people men might be Christians and not know it; that many were so, doubtless, who did not regard themselves as Christians; that it was a bad sign to be too sure and confident, etc., etc. It fills my heart with grief to see a minister take so much pains to let the people down to the level of his own experience. This defective experience may be a legal, as distinct from a gospel, experience, or it may have other elements of a false religion. No matter if it be false, it becomes a grievous occasion of stumbling.

8. Men stumble over a false profession. Even though they may see clear as light that they have professed without possession, yet their pride may keep them from admitting it. Then, to keep up appearance, they are subjected to a life of hypocrisy--a fearful curse to the soul!

It often happens that these false professors are a stumbling block to others. Sinners will place before themselves some false professor, choosing the worst and not the best, as their model of religion, and say, "Well, any how, I am as good as some professed Christians." So they think to hide behind such an example, and stumble over it to the depths of hell.

The real faults of professed Christians often become the occasion of stumbling to sinners. They however do not usually go to the bottom of the difficulty. They ascribe their stumbling to the faults, say, of a certain minister; but the real cause lies in their own state of mind. If they were right themselves, not even the real faults of Christians would stumble them. These faults might grieve them; but could not harm them. "Great peace have they that love thy law, and nothing shall offend (stumble) them;"--not even the manifest faults of gospel ministers.

It is much more common for men to stumble over apparent or supposed, than over real faults. The common feeling towards Christians being what it is, there are vastly more apparent or supposed faults than real ones, floating about on the surface of the common talk of the world. All these answer the purpose of those who really seek some relief from the pressure of a troubled conscience, and who want some excuse for a life of sin.

9. Men are wont to stumble over their own dishonest moral judgments. For example, they judge themselves by a false standard. One, it may be, of mere external morality instead of heart piety; while at the same time they know better, as is manifest from the fact that they judge others by a very different rule. They will insist that others must truly love God, and not merely be of decent morality. Why do they not judge themselves by this same standard? They are not honest. Besides, in practice, they will allow themselves to do the very same things which they condemn and stumble over in others.

10. Their habit of procrastination is the ruin of thousands. They hear enough, but not for the sake of learning their duty that they may do it. They learn not to regard what they hear. Persons who have lived here a long time seem not to be aware of their fearful danger in this respect.

11. It is fearful to see how many stumble over God's forbearance. Because vengeance is not executed speedily, their hearts are fully set in them to do evil. The longer God waits on them, the more presumptuous they become. Indeed nothing is more commonly a stumbling-block to men than God's goodness. They will have it that God is too good to send men to hell. Instead of combining his goodness with justice and holiness, as they should, they fritter it down to a mere good-nature. They think him good with such a sort of goodness that he cannot restrain his creatures from ruining themselves, and the whole universe besides--so very good-natured that he must forsooth let all the wicked be as wicked and selfish as they please, and must be sure not to hurt them, however much they desolate his great family and spread ruin over his kingdom. How often and naturally universalists do this! In fact, it seems to lie at the foundation of their system. David said, "Why boasteth thou thyself in mischief, O mighty man? The goodness of God endureth continually;"--the very goodness of God being a reason why men should be afraid to do m[i]schief.

12. Multitudes are stumbled by their selfish views of the whole matter of personal religion. Their whole conception of the plan of salvation makes it only an expedient to accommodate their sin, so that they can enjoy sin almost to the end of life, and then get religion enough to save their souls from hell. Have not some of you made this very mistake? Has not this been the great practical question with you;--How long will it be prudent to neglect this great salvation? How long can I afford to run the personal risk of living in sin? So asking, your whole concern turns on self. You care not a farthing for God's feelings, or his rights. You have not the remotest idea of laying your soul and body on his altar, and making yourself truly a living sacrifice to the interests of his kingdom. All the love he has shown you seems to have no influence to draw you towards this earnest

consecration to his service. A sinful heart makes men credulous as to falsehood, but incredulous as to truth. "How is it," said one, "that incredulity takes on such a type? Men are strangely incredulous as to what is good. They doubt the sincerity of this good man; but their doubts all look in only one direction, for they are most ridiculously credulous in admitting lies."

III. A few words should be said here as to the course that true wisdom dictates.

The facts of human consciousness in regard to man's selfishness and alienation from God should be thoroughly admitted and deeply studied.

You should most fully assume the fact of God's infinite love, purity, wisdom and power. I say assume these, because you certainly know them to be true. You know that God is universally and perfectly good. This you know and should never allow yourself to call in question.

Let it also be taken for granted that no objection can be valid against God's law or his gospel.

If men would assume these two things, it would save them from countless mistakes and delusions;--namely, (1.) That God is infinite and perfect; consequently nothing can be said against him; (2.) That there never can be any valid excuse for sin. The goodness of God makes it certain that his law is right, and his administration too;--that he never requires anything unreasonable. Wisdom dictates therefore, that these points should be forever settled.

Again, you should always assume man's natural alienation from God. Say, I am , if unconverted, an enemy of God. Let me remember that. Let it be settled also and admitted, that being an enemy, you are almost sure to be prejudiced. This must be true of you and of all who are enemies in heart to God. Now if you know you are prejudiced, or are likely to be, you ought to be closely on your guard in that direction. For example, those of you who have a hope that does not purify your heart, take warning. Remember your proneness to self-deception. And those of you who never had a hope should say--the causes of self-deception are in my very heart; I am in the utmost peril of deceiving myself; let me be on my guard against self-justification and against a thousand other sources of danger. My dear friend, you must cast yourself on God for help. Say to him--"O Lord my God, thou knowest all my wicked heart, and thou knowest how many dangers beset me on every side. Now unless thou save me, I shall surely ruin myself."

Another thing; beware what you hear and how you hear it, lest you listen earnestly to the wrong and love it; or lest, hearing truth, your heart should be turned aside by prejudice, and you permit it to your destruction. Say to yourself--I shall certainly do something to ruin my soul if I am not on my guard. Consider always that while in sin, your state of mind is such as exceedingly to endanger your ultimate salvation. You ought to know the great facts of your own consciousness; and these should solemnly admonish you of your ever present danger.

REMARKS.

1. Because sinners are dishonest, their delusions are entirely inexcusable. If they were really honest, and their delusions excusable, their case would be far other than it is.

2. All the prejudice and errors of sinful men will come out by and by. They cannot last forever. Their utter fallacy and guilt will stand revealed by and by. But it may then be too late to repair their mischief.

There, said a man, now I am sorry; I had a wicked prejudice against a good minister; I held it a long time and it poisoned my mind terribly. At length, I said to him--Don't you hold this sentiment? No, said he, by no means. Then I found all my prejudices were causeless, and I had brought leanness and guilt on my soul, for no good reason whatever. So sinner, you may be sorry. Your mistake will come out by and by; but very likely too late to be corrected in this world. Then the Lord shall come with ten thousand of his saints to execute judgment upon all, he will surely convince all the ungodly of their ungodly deeds and speeches. But for your real repentance, this will come all too late. Alas, you allowed yourself to disbelieve; you went on stumbling in the darkness which your own wicked heart caused, and now it only remains that you be driven away into everlasting darkness, where is weeping and wailing. The darkness of the sinner's final doom may well remind him of the mental darkness which his own soul loved and caused while on earth.

It is often sorely painful to see men stumble in matters which respect only the body. Sometimes they take to the use of quack nostrums, and poison their bodies; sometimes they imbibe the most ridiculous superstitions, and violate the laws of life till they fall an easy prey to pestilence. In cholera times, men would soak their bodies with alcoholic liquors, and surely die by the hand of their own remedy.

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But what are all these delusions, compared with that which takes away the soul! Suppose you could see the moral course of sinners painted to the life--their poor self-deluded souls stumbling into pit-falls which their own hands had dug--sliding down precipices at the foot of which open the jaws of the bottomless pit;--there, there he goes! Alas, you have seen him, but your eyes shall see him no more! Gone, gone, where darkness reigns forever! But you see others all around about you, pursuing the same path, and nearing the same death-verge, just ready, some of them, to slide over;--and what will you do? Can you save them?

Christians are said by Christ to be the lights of the world. So let them take care to be. Let them stand as lamp-posts in the city in dead of night, pouring light on the dangers that would else engulf the unwary. Some of you have heard of the fogs of London--where the coal-smoke of many thousand fires is wont in a misty atmosphere to settle down like Egyptian darkness upon all the city. When the thick fogs join their influence, London in mid-day is darker than midnight. Men cannot move save by the light of flambeaux held close to the ground as they pass along. How vivid the picture there given, of the deep and thick darkness that rests down on the city of Destruction, where sinners live! Darkness so profound as this seems not to comprehend the light when it comes. There in London, shall be lamps on their posts, burning with what power they have; but in the dense darkness they are visible only a few feet. The light shineth as in the Savior's day, but "the darkness comprehendeth it not." So often to the minds of sinners now. The light of Christian example and instruction shines around them, but their dense impenetrable darkness does not "comprehend" it. Alas for them.