

333 A stone of stumbling ...

In Isaiah 8.13-15 we read these words, addressed by the Lord through His prophet Isaiah to His people who were under threat from their enemies: “Sanctify the Lord of hosts himself ... And he shall be for a sanctuary; but for a stone of stumbling and for a rock of offence to both the houses of Israel, for a gin and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many among them shall stumble, and fall, and be broken, and be snared, and be taken” (KJV).

We see here the Lord is calling His people to stay faithful to Him as their sanctuary, but with the prediction that this divine Stone and Rock would cause trouble for those who rejected this sanctuary.

With Christian hindsight we now see the full, later significance of this “stone of stumbling and rock of offence”, this “gin and snare” causing so many to “stumble and fall, to be broken, snared and taken”. It is of course the Lord Jesus Christ Himself - the Son of God, the Messiah, “God-with-us”, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (egs., Luke 1.31-35 & 2.32 / John 1.1-14,29,34 & 8.58 / Colossians 1.12-22 / ...). Here is the ultimate gift to this fallen, sinful, helpless, needy world from Almighty God our Creator and loving Father – truly the best possible news of all, that could never be bettered!

And yet, see what happens. Despite the abundance of blessings wrought by Christ and freely offered to us all in Him, for so many people He is the cause of stumbling and offence: for whatever reasons they may come up with, they refuse this Gift and this Sanctuary.

The Lord Jesus Christ experienced this hostility and rejection at first hand and at such horrific personal cost during His time of physical presence here on earth. In Romans Chapter 9.32b-33 the words in Isaiah 8.14 and a similar passage in Isaiah 28.16 are quoted by the Holy Spirit through Paul with regard to the Jews themselves, who indeed had stumbled at that “stumblingstone and rock of offence”. (Praise God, the promise “whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed” is yet to come true for the believing Jews (Romans 11)).

Isaiah 28.16 and Psalm 118.22 are then quoted together in I Peter 2.6-8: Christ is precious to those who believe in Him, but to those who reject Him He is, ‘the stone which the builders disallowed ... the head of the corner and a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence ...’.

So the message, for those of us who bear the name of Christ by God's grace in this generation, is all too clear: Jesus Christ divides. As we all know, many of our fellow Christians around the world are undergoing harassment, persecution, arrest, prison or violent death, on account of their steady allegiance to the "stone of stumbling and the rock of offence".

In "the Christian-shaped West" we are less familiar with such treatment, but things are changing quite rapidly. A strident intolerance of the Christian Faith and its adherents is becoming more common, linked with the downgrading of the Faith to place it on a level with other "World Faiths", for "the world" hates the exclusive claims of Christ. A small but notable example of this downgrading this week involved the avowedly-Christian Prime Minister sending her good wishes to the Muslims of this country at the start of Ramadan, (sentiments then repeated by the Leader of the Opposition). This apparently simple message of goodwill fosters the message that Islam is as valid a faith as Christianity, that it is a growing and positive presence in our midst, (apparently there are now over 3,000 mosques in the UK and nine British cities have Muslim Mayors), and that it sits comfortably within this Christian-shaped, but now post-Christian, society. One commentator has described what is going on over all this as "Britain being conquered without bloodshed".

Is this not a pressing case of "the stone of stumbling and rock of offence" getting the same old "Never-mind-Him treatment", by people in power who should know better?

God's Word remains crystal clear on these matters, and here is a lengthy list of examples, from the many more available, for us to "read, mark, learn and inwardly digest" afresh: Matthew 11.27 / John 3.14-18, 35-36 & 14.6 / Romans 3.21-26 & 10.9-13 / I Corinthians 15.20-28 / II Corinthians 5.17-21 / Ephesians 1.3-7ff / I Timothy 2.5-6 / Titus 2.11-14 / I John 2.21-23 & 4.1-3 / Revelation 1.5-6.

Yes, God's Word is crystal clear, and with courtesy we must be crystal clear too, for this is not a game. God's truth is at stake, focussed as ever in the unique Person and Work of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

For Jesus Christ remains as much as ever the Sanctuary for those who accept Him, and "the stone of stumbling and the rock of offence" for those who don't.