TITLE: BIBLICAL STUMBLING BLOCKS

TEXT: Ex. 11:4-6; Deut. 7:1-2; 1 Sam. 15:1-3;

Jonah 1:1-3, 4:1-3, 4:9-11; Isa. 55:8-9

INTRODUCTION: This morning I want to talk about Biblical Stumbling blocks. Biblical stumbling blocks are those portions of Scripture that unbelievers often find offensive and keep them from seeking God.

 It is those thorny questions they will often raise with a Christian about the nature of God.

 These biblical stumbling blocks are not just reserved for non-believers but they sometimes even affect us as Christians in the development of our own theology about God.

Let me give a few Scriptural examples:

 As God is about to deliver His people, the Israelites from over 300 years of slavery to the Egyptians God says this to Moses..

**Exodus 11:4 - 6 (NIV)** **4…..“This is what the LORD says: ‘About midnight I will go throughout Egypt.** **5Every firstborn son in Egypt will die, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the firstborn son of the slave girl, who is at her hand mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle as well.** **6There will be loud wailing throughout Egypt—worse than there has ever been or ever will be again.**

 The tenth plague against Egypt…The killing of every firstborn son as the death angel went through the land.

Then some 40 years later as the Israelites are about to end their desert wanderings and go into the Promised Land God gives them these instructions:

 **Deuteronomy 7:1 - 2 (NIV)** **1When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations—the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you—**

**2and when the LORD your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy.**

And then we find this account with the first King of Israel, King Saul..

**1 Samuel 15:1 - 3 (NIV) 1Samuel said to Saul, “I am the one the LORD sent to anoint you king over his people Israel; so listen now to the message from the LORD.  2This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt.** **3Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.’”**

 These are the kinds of potential Biblical stumbling blocks that I am talking about….

These are the things that often will cause non-believers to ask thorny questions such as:

 How could God order Israelite soldiers to so mercilessly slaughter the children of their enemies?

 Even many Christians have a major problem with these kinds of Scriptures.

 The idea that a good and loving God would do such an apparently hash thing is a stumbling block to the faith for many people.

This question nagged so much at journalists Lee Strobel that he went to theologian Norman Geiser for some answers.

In his book “the case for faith” Strobel describes their conversation and what he learned.

 Strobel reminded Geiser of all the times that God commanded Israel to kill children. Such as in Exodus 15 when God sends the death angel to kill all the firstborn in Egypt and in Deut. 7 when God told Israel to “totally destroy” the Canaanites and six other nations and in 1st Samuel when God commanded King Saul to completely destroy the Amalekites. To utterly destroy them killing all the men, all the women, all of the children including the infants.

Strobel asked Geiser, Can people be expected to worship God if He orders innocent children to be slaughtered?

 The answer, Geiser told him, is that God’s character is absolutely holy; He must punish sin and rebellion.

 The Bible shows that the Amalekites were utterly depraved---and their goal was to wipe out God’s chosen people. So God used the Israelites as His instrument of judgment.

Strobel asked, but why did innocent children need to be destroyed?

 First Geiser says. God is sovereign over all of life, and he has the right to take it if he wishes.

 Second, for good or ill, children throughout history have always shared the fate of their parents.

Third, given the violent and depraved nature of the Amalekite culture, there was no hope for these children.

But then Geiser said this: In a sense God’s action was an act of mercy in that many Christians believe that a child who dies before the age of accountability goes to Heaven.

Think about this for a moment… If these children who had been raised is such a wicked and debase culture had been left alive they probably would have ended up as wicked as their parents and when they died at a later age they would have certainly ended up in hell.

Young children who have not yet reached the age of accountability, if they died before they reached that age would not suffer the fate of their ungodly parents…An eternity separated from God in hell….

That is not wicked or unfair but that is Divine Grace and Mercy!

In any event, it is the prerogative of a merciful, Just and Holy God to make that decision.

Finally, the Amalekites where given plenty of time to repent, and they chose not to.

And it was God’s Holy nature that demanded that he deal with their persistent evil.

 It was much the same with the Canaanites and the other six nations that God told the Israelites to destroy upon entrance into the Promised Land. They were peoples that practiced incest, bestiality, cultic prostitution, and child sacrifice.

The Bible says that their culture was so evil that it nauseated God. So God destroyed them….

The reason that God did what he did was for the protection and welfare of His people, His children..

This is something that ought to resonate with us as parents today..

Example:

 If there is a child rapist in your community that has raped several of its children and that person has been caught, slapped on the wrist and then released to do it again and they do….What would you be willing to do as a parent in order to protect your children?

 Show no mercy the next time they are caught?

 See that they are put behind bars for life?

 Make the molestation of a child a capital offense and put the perpetrator to death?

 What if you could see into the future and knew that your child or grandchild would be their next victim?

What would you, as a parent, as a grandparent, be willing to do to protect them?

We cannot see into the future but God can!

And just that fact alone gives God, not just the right to do what He does but it makes it His responsibility to do it..

With very few exceptions in Scripture God has almost always used people to enact His justice.

Sometimes He has used His people to enact His justice on wicked nations and cultures.

Sometimes He has used wicked nations and cultures to chastise His own children when they have strayed from Him and have endangered their very eternal existence by doing so.

 But throughout Biblical history whoever was repentant and would repent of their evil God was willing to forgive and save.

There is probably no better example than the people of Nineveh in the time of Jonah.

**Jonah 1:1 - 3 (NIV) 1The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai:  2“Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”**

**3But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.**

OK, The Lord commands His prophet to go to the city of Nineveh and preach against it because its wickedness as come up before Him….

 Jonah doesn’t want to do it and runs away from God!

Why?

 Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire. Assyria was a natural enemy of the Israelites.

 God had used them to chastise His disobedient and wondering people in the past.

 Jonah didn’t want to go and warn them of God’s impending judgment because Jonah would like nothing better than to see Nineveh destroyed by God!

 They were the enemy of his people!

So Jonah hops on a ship headed for Tarshish to try to run from God…

We know the story…. Jonah ends up getting thrown overboard and get swallowed by a great fist, a whale, and then after 3 days inside of its belly gets spit out on the shore….

 After the experience he reluctantly then goes to the city of Nineveh with the message of the Lord.

 in three days Nineveh will be destroyed.. ( Jonah leave our “ Repent or “..

Nineveh repents—From the King all the way down to the slave.

Because of Nineveh’s repentance God relents His judgment and spares the city.

 Jonah gets angry and goes outside the city and pouts because God has spared Nineveh.

**Jonah 4:1 - 2 (NIV) 1But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry.**

 **2He prayed to the LORD, “O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.**

Jonah is so upset with the situation that he wants to die himself

 **Jonah 4:3 (NIV) 3Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”**

 To try to give Jonah an attitude adjustment God sends a hot wind upon Jonah and then God sends a vine to protect Jonah from the heat and then He sends a worm to kill the vine so that Jonah loses his protection from the heat that God had previously provided.

 So then Jonah gets mad at God because of the vine!

**Jonah 4:9 - 11 (NIV)** **9But God said to Jonah, “Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?” “I do,” he said. “I am angry enough to die.”** **10But the LORD said, “You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight.** **11But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?”**

God was saying: Jonah you are more concerned about this silly plant then you are about a city with more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left!

 Who was God talking about? He wasn’t talking about 120,000 mentally challenged people. He was talking about 120,000 infant children! Children too young to yet determine the right hand from their left!

The point is God is always willing to save the repentant no matter who they are.

 But God also knows who is beyond repentance.

He knows those who have hardened their hearts so hard against Him that they will never repent.

Such as the case with Pharaoh and the Canaanites and the Amalekites..

So God will often use the unrepentant as instruments of destruction to fulfill His greater purpose and plan.

Sometimes we can see or understand His grace and Mercy in the judgment of the wicked and sometimes we can’t!

But whether we understand or not does not change the fact the God always acts justly and rightly in whatever he does.

A verse that comes to mind is:

**Isaiah 55:8 - 9 (NIV)** **8“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. 9“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.**

The Hebrew word we translate as **thoughts** is:

***makh-ash-aw-baw',***

***intention*, *plan* (whether bad or good, a *plot*; (work), device, imagination, purpose, thought.**

The Hebrew word we translate as **way** is:

 ***deh'-rek***

**a *road*, a *course* of life or *mode* of action, journey, path or pathway.**

The Hebrew word we translate as **higher** is:

***gaw-bah'***

**A primitive root; to *soar*, that is, *be* *lofty*;*:—*exalt, (make) high, lift up, mount up, raise up great height, upward.**

 What this is telling us or reminding us is that Gods intensions and plans, His motives and motivations, His acts and actions are infinitely higher and greater than ours could ever be.

 **As the heavens are higher than the earth,  so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.**

And what should make this ok or acceptable to us is because of Gods Holy and righteous nature.

 God’s nature is perfect! His knowledge is perfect! His mercy is perfect! His justice is perfect! Everything that He says or does is said and done in the complete perfection that His holy nature demands!

 Sometimes we may run into Biblical stumbling blocks and it isn’t easy for us to understand or accept what God determines. But even in our confusion—or our personal distress—we need to be willing to trust in the rightness of Gods righteous decisions.

We may not understand or comprehend everything that God does but we do need to, by faith, accept what He does as the right thing to do whether we fully understand it or not.

**“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. 9“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.**

There will always be things that we are simply not able to fully nor completely understand or comprehend about God.

 And that is when biblical faith becomes essential to us as Christians.

The Biblical faith that is described in:

**Hebrews 11:1 (NIV) 1Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.**

When we come to those potential Biblical stumbling blocks, come to things about God and His holy nature that we just cannot get our finite minds around, is the time when we need to embrace a Hebrews 11 faith.

 A **faith that is sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.**

A faith that simply relies upon and stands fast in the Holy and righteous nature of God who is incapable of error or of making a mistake.

We embrace that faith by surrendering our all to Him who gave His all for us.

**1 John 1:5 This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.**

 Whether we fully understand or comprehend what God is doing in our lives or the lives of those around us really makes no difference for we can always trust in the One who holds us firmly in His hands.

 For**“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.**

**Prayer**

Lord, help us to never trip over the stumbling blocks that we may encounter in our life as a Child of God.

 Help us to remember that, while your actions may sometimes confound or even confuse us, that your Holy nature and character contains no contradictions.

 That you are perfect in all that you say and do.

Lord, help us to embrace and model a Hebrews chapter 11 faith in the world that we live.

 A faith that is sure of what we hope for and certain of things that we cannot see.

 Lord, we ask for Godly wisdom when we come upon non-believers who have stumbled upon these things and help us to lead them to You so that they too can receive your mercy and Grace and come to a saving faith in You…