

Nothing is more devastating than a runner tripping before the finish line of a race or an indiscretion destroying a reputation or relationship. Whether self-inflicted or concocted by an opponent, such distractions discredit and slow down any successes that might have been possible. Scandal has cost elections to be lost, Hall of Fame status to be denied, and coaches to be fired. Scandal is a word politicians fear and booksellers dream of. Over and over again, scandals change victory into defeat, and destroy peoples' lives.

Scandals are something to avoid! And yet, the Greek word "scandal" is at the heart of Jesus' message to Peter. Peter had just proclaimed "Jesus IS the Messiah," and Jesus renamed him "Petros" or "rock!" He said this confession is the foundation of faith. But Peter's next words changed the mood completely.

Jesus explained his strategy for accomplishing his mission. He said that he would suffer, die, be buried, and then return to life. Peter was caught off guard. This is not what he expected and he didn't like the sound of what Jesus had just said, and cried out "NO WAY, Jesus. That is not what a Messiah should do!" Jesus' response to Peter was "get behind me!" He said "you are blocking my progress, getting in the way of my message with a misunderstanding as severe as that." In the Greek New Testament, the word that is used is Skandalon (translated "scandalous" today.) Now why, of all words, did Jesus use the word, scandal?

There are two words that can be translations of this Greek word. One is "stumbling block" ... the other is the "crooked stick in a trap that holds the bait." Think about how each of those images fits your understanding of "scandal!"

How interesting that Peter, so strong in his confession only a moment before was seen by Jesus as a potential impediment to his success. A more literal translation would be, "Peter, your perception of what kind of Messiah I should be is a trap. You have swallowed Satan's bait and don't want me to take the pathway I have chosen to begin a new kind of kingdom."

If Jesus had avoided suffering and death, his followers would be happy but his mission would be a failure, This is the trap he anguished over in the garden. "If there is another way" he prayed, let this cup of suffering pass. But if this is the way, give me strength!" Whether we translate this word as "stumbling block" or "trap" we get the point! Now we understand Jesus' words to Peter. And how the rock or faith upon which the Church will be built, can easily be converted into a "trap" or a "stumbling block" when we try to manipulate or control that gift of faith.

I heard an interview about a movement within a segment of American Christianity that wants to use religion to control government. The belief of these Christians is that America must conform to their particular perception of fundamentalism, in order to hasten the second coming and begin a 1000-year reign of Christ on earth. They are devout but have turned the Gospel of servant love and faith in Christ into a message of a messianic kingdom based on political power and a new temple in Jerusalem.

Just as scandalous are those who have wonderfully loving motives and goals to be inclusive and serve all people, and yet use earthly power, might and control to force everyone into their gracious actions. In either extreme, scandal is the stumbling block or trap that gets in the way of faith in Jesus.

If Jesus is indeed the Messiah and Savior of the world, then it is his actions alone that will change his world and set us free to live with the same servant love as He did. To assume the ways of the world to hasten the return of a Messianic king is a trap or stumbling block that Jesus warned Peter and each of us to avoid.

Because we don't like what we see around us, it is easy to assume God is waiting for us to act first, so that he will give us what we want. But living by faith means that we believe God has already acted on our behalf and given us what we need. There is nothing more that can be done that what Jesus has done for us with a cross and empty tomb. His actions are scandalous enough – God himself in the flesh – God accepting our punishment as his own – God enduring our death to grant us his life.

Not only is there nothing more to say, but there is nothing more to do. God has acted decisively. Rather than needing to help God, we are called to help each other by seeking not to becoming stumbling blocks to the faith of others or becoming trapped by our own need to control or manipulate God.

In Kingsolver's great novel, "The Poisonwood Bible," there is a scene where the overzealous missionary, Nathan Price shows how easily we can be trapped. He spent years in a native village of the Congo, seeking to convert its inhabitants to Christianity. They wanted to believe but he insisted that they could only have faith IF they were baptized by immersion in the river.

When they resisted, he saw his mission as a failure – even though they had faith, they didn't do it the way he insisted and so he walked away from them and condemned them for not becoming his kind of Christians. Had he taken time to listen to them, he would have understood that the river was full of crocodiles, and anyone who went into the river would surely die.

And so, you understand what a parable this is for the scandalous traps that we set when we manipulate God's grace into our control. In this case the people wanted to be redeemed and set free, but Nathan Price's arrogance trapped all of them in a dance of distress and confusion.

As kids, my brother and I, more than once took a box, a stick with a string, and breadcrumbs as we tried to build a trap for a bird. Now we had no clue why we would want to trap a bird but felt pretty clever with our creativity. That is the same thing we run into when we try to tell God how to be God, rather than having faith that God has all our bases covered. We think we are so smart and clever and strong, but have no clue how to love, forgive, serve, or cheat death without the gifts and guidance of a loving God.

If we want to talk about scandal, we need go no farther than the cross. What looks like foolishness to the world is what traps Satan and leads to our escape from death. The cross is the final word of our old life. The empty tomb is the first word of our new life.

The ultimate scandal is that Christ died for me! And yet what a loving gift of grace! How tragic if my response would ever be a stumbling block or trap that would harm or limit the faith of myself or others. Rather than turning the Gospel into something it is not, our surrender of faith trusts that God will change us into something useful for him. We might not always understand or control how that works ... but by faith it will be so.