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## Stumbling Blocks

By Dodd Sims, M.D.

*“Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister”* Romans 14:13. (New International Version)

I cannot help noticing these glistening cobble stones in Berlin. They are everywhere. If you don't pay attention, you literally trip over them. These are the famous *Stolpersteine*, the stumbling stones that commemorate people who were persecuted by the Nazis between 1933 and 1945. They mark the last voluntarily chosen homes of Jews and other victims deported during the Holocaust.

The names, date of birth, date of deportation, and date of death of the occupants of the house where you stand are engraved onto four-inch square brass plaques stuck in among the normal sidewalk paving stones.

We have these searing reminders of the lives of the victims because the Nazis kept exceptionally good records. We also have these stumbling stones because a German artist, Gunter Demnig, started a project to install these miniature memorials in Berlin in 1996. The *Stolpersteine* Project is now in many places in Germany, Austria, Belgium, Finland, and many other countries and cities in Europe, but the ones I keep coming back to every morning are just across from my hotel.

Martha Zuckermann was born in Poland in 1866. She was deported to **Theresienstadt** in Czechoslovakia on July 17, 1942, and was murdered on September 19, 1943. Her husband, Salomon, was deported with her. He died on May 11, 1944.

So many other stumbling stones – thousands upon thousands! You find them in virtually every residential street in central Berlin. One or two in front of this building, five or six next door. Busy Berliners mostly step right over the plaques, but occasionally someone must have stopped: you see the cut flowers they leave, one stem for each brass paving stone; one for each life lost but no longer forgotten.

Now, Paul in Romans 14 exhorts us to look past our individual differences in favor of a higher, spiritual good. Those of strong faith should not feel superior to those of weaker faith. We ought not to judge people for eating what we consider unclean food. We should build each other up. We should not look down – down at the details that separate us. But rather, we must look up – up to the promise of all that God has in store for us.

And yet, and yet... Sometimes we must look down. Stumbling stones really are in our lives. They are there for a reason – we need to slow down; we need to stop and stare; we need to think about the life of Martha Zuckermann. We need to ponder the death of Salomon Zuckermann.

When did they last see each other? When did they last embrace? Was it at that railroad siding on July 17, 1942, when the cattle cars stood open, waiting to load the “passengers” for the trip to the camp? Or were they briefly together in Theresienstadt? What were those last months like for Salomon, those eight months between September 1943 when his wife died and May 1944 when he was murdered?

So yes, remember, do not put a stumbling block in front of a brother or sister. Do not quibble about our differences in doctrine; our views on the issues of the day. Do not judge. Encourage each other in our faith.

Let us keep our eyes raised, focused on God and God's Kingdom, on all the good that God has planned for us.

And when you do find a stumbling block in your path, do not be afraid to look down. Do not just go around it. Do not step over it. Stop. Stop and think. Stop and think about why the stone is there. Stop and remember that unique child of God. Stand and wonder about their beloved. What were they thinking, what were they feeling in the last months of their lives?

And then, we imagine – what will I be thinking, what will I be feeling in the last months of my own life?

*Author's note:*

You can read about **stumbling blocks** dedicated this fall at the Ball-Sellers house in Arlington as part of the "Memorializing the Enslaved in Arlington, 1669-1895" project.