

A CAGE FULL OF BIRDS

In the book of Jeremiah we find an interesting passage. At first glance, it seems to transmit a very unique message that we don't seem to see in other parts of the scriptures. Let us take a look at this very striking passage to see what God has to say to us from it.

"For among my people are found wicked men; they lie in wait as one who sets snares; they set a trap; they catch men. As a cage is full of birds, so their houses are full of deceit. Therefore they have become great and grown rich. They have grown fat, they are sleek; yes, they surpass {or, overlook} the deeds of the wicked; they do not plead the cause – the cause of the fatherless. Yet they prosper, and the right of the needy they do not defend. Shall I not punish them for these things?" (Jer 5:26-29 NKJV).

Here we find God speaking about something He considers "wicked." It is an act of evil men. And what is this vile act? It is to catch men. It is to bait a trap in order to catch others in it. The goal of this "catching men" is to fill their "houses" with people.

But why would someone want to fill their "house" with other people? It could be that they enjoy lording it over and controlling others. It must be that they like the sensation of being an important person whom others look up to and admire. Their pride is elevated. Their ego is stroked. They have become "great." According to this verse, it also means that they are using these people to enrich themselves without regard to the financial situation of those under their control from whom they get their money.

These men (and/or women) have found and developed ways to attract and hold followers. They have discovered devious means to impress others and bind them to themselves. In the Christian world today, this could be accomplished through preaching certain doctrines and practices which seem to be right and which only that particular leader or group teaches.

The Jeremiah passage labels this activity as "deceit." The followers of the above mentioned leaders have been deceived. They have been duped into accepting the program and beliefs of these leaders and so have been trapped by them for their personal gain. These "leaders" have caught them and put them in their cages. Some translations of this verse say something like this: "As a cage is full of birds, so their houses are full [of followers] *through* deceit" (vs 27) instead of "of deceit."

Now it is possible that Christians reading this verse may not fully understand the error of this kind of practice. Since it is very common today for men with some kind of "ministry" to use their gifts to attract followers and fill their "churches" with members, this practice has become generally accepted and is even thought to be good.

After all, people reason, didn't Jesus tell his disciples He would make them "fishers of men" (Mt 4:19)? What could this mean if it doesn't mean to catch and collect men?

The problem here is who are we collecting men for? Is it for ourselves or for Jesus? Are we filling our "houses" or His? Although many confuse a "church building" or Christian organization with the "house of God" they are not the same thing.

You see, Jesus already has His “group.” It is called “the church.” He is the head of it and it is He who is building it. This group of people should never be divided. No part of it should ever fall under the control of someone other than Jesus or even alongside of Jesus.

Although our Lord’s “group” is divided by limitations of geography, practicality, etc. it was never meant to be divided into any smaller segments based upon different human leadership. It was meant to always be one church, one body. Anyone, therefore, who acts in a way which severs this body into smaller segments is acting contrary to His will.

Furthermore, His will is that this group be only His. It is meant to be under His direction only. His plan is that He would be the one and only “leader.” Anyone, therefore, who begins to dominate a small subgroup of believers and regard them as their own “church” or “work” begins to compete with Jesus as their leader.

Yet, the practice of “catching” men and then joining them into some kind of church group or other is very common today. This is done by many different people with various kinds motives. This has produced numerous tragic results. When believers are separated off into smaller groups or “churches” with human leadership, they are invariably cut off, to a greater or lesser extent, from their true Head which is Jesus.

The insertion of any authority figure in the place of Jesus who is *the* Anointed One, limits and frustrates the ability of the believers under that person’s control to intimately know and follow their true Master.

This limitation is both very real and very harmful. We were made by God to be able to follow only one Master (Lk 16:13). Any other competing source of authority will only confuse and mislead the believer. Since human leaders are easier to see and hear, frequently people end up following them rather than our invisible Lord. Perhaps, because of the prevalence of this sort of activity today, many do not realize the damage which is being done, but it certainly exists and has a very negative impact.

When following human leadership, people inevitably begin to rely more and more on men and less upon God. When the guidance of the two leaders – God and the human leader – are divergent, the normal human tends to trust what is visible and audible rather than in God who is invisible. Slowly, their dependence upon man grows and their relationship with Jesus diminishes. This then negatively impacts their spiritual life and maturity.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

Let us now go on to look at the scriptures to see if there are any others which reinforce this important truth. We have already read one verse from the Old Testament in which God condemns catching men and using them for our own glory and benefit. But are there any other such verses in the Bible? Does the New Testament have any similar warnings? Surprisingly, it does. It has quite a few of them. Yet many of these verses seem to have been obscured in our present translations.

The common religious practices of the last centuries seem to have clouded the minds of many translators of the New Testament. The idea of catching men “for Christ” and forming them into groups under the direction of human leaders has been the norm for a long, long time. Therefore, many translators have approached their work with some preconceived ideas gained from their experience and observation of “Christianity” at work.

Although not all men who have followed this birdcage pattern have had selfish motives in what they have done (in fact, some no doubt have had a good heart and wanted to help others) human beings are easily corrupted. Some may have started well, but when prestige, human honor, fame and even money began to come their way, their purity of purpose can change. It is extremely difficult for the human being who receives praise, honor and money from men to remain a humble servant.

It is also very difficult for someone who begins to receive money from some kind of organization or other to remain free of all dependence on that organization. Such dependence, over time, easily alters a person’s actions and thinking, especially when the salary is good.

One of the first New Testament passages which attracts our attention is found in the book of Acts chapter 20, verses 29-31. These words were spoken by Paul when he was saying last goodbyes to the brothers from Ephesus. He would never see them again and so was very concerned for their future welfare.

In this context he said: “I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise to distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them[selves]. So be on your guard! Remembering that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears [about such things]” (Acts 20:29-31 NIV).

Paul considered this kind of danger very real. The peril of a human being coming into God’s “group” and leading members away for himself was very concrete. It was extremely important to him that the brothers would be aware of this evil activity and studiously avoid it. You may have noticed that these “wolves” distort God’s truth. No doubt this is the same as the “deceit” about which Jeremiah spoke.

Here we see that there will be some, even Christians, who will act with selfish motives. They will use the scriptures, subtly altering them to attract, catch and keep followers. They want to have some “birds” in their own cage. In fact, the more the better. They want to have their own group or “church” where they are the big man, where they are the leader who others respect and follow.

But a true servant of God never has his own ambition and selfish motives in mind. His heart is to serve God alone. His goal is to gather people into the Lord’s fold, not his. He is not looking for honor (Jn 5:41 NKJV), fame or money. He never tries to get a group of his own followers. He has no desire to impress others. He doesn’t seek anything for himself. As a servant in God’s house, his motives and actions are all directed toward building up his Master’s kingdom and advancing His glory. His desire is that Jesus be glorified in everything and that His “group” be built up.

In Colossians chapter 2, verse 8 we find another admonition from Paul concerning this very problem. We read: “See to it that no one takes you captive [for themselves] through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (NIV).

The Father’s Life Version reads: “Be careful so that no one leads you away as plunder *for themselves* using philosophy and empty, deceptive ideas, which is the way men often operate, following the normal worldly pattern, but which is not the way of the Anointed One.”

You see, this practice of trying to attract followers and build your own group is common. It is the “normal worldly pattern.” It is “the way men often operate.” You can see it being practiced almost everywhere in the world today among believers. In fact, it has now been accepted as “normal” or even as a desirable thing. But it is not the way of Jesus Christ. Don’t be put in someone else’s birdcage.

Once you are separated from God’s group by some man or men and put into a “sub group” of believers, you have become their “plunder” or their “captive.” Now you are being used for their purposes and their glory. Of course, they try very hard to obscure and hide this fact with their words, teachings and reasonings. They will use all their soulish mental and emotional power to persuade you that by putting yourself under their authority “you are in the right place.” You will be kept “safe.” But this is not the truth. Paul clearly shows us that this is just the way the world always works and always has worked. It is certainly not the way of God’s kingdom.

Although many have not realized it, the New Testament is actually full of such similar warnings. For example, in 2 Peter chapter 2, verses 1 and 3 we read: “But there also arose false prophets among the people, just as among you too there will be false teachers who will craftily take others captive *as their own followers*, bringing ruin...” “And in their greediness for money, using carefully crafted words, they will use you for their personal gain...” (FLNT).

This phrase “take others captive” is often translated in other versions, “introduce destructive heresies.” Yet the Greek word here, HAIREISIS, has a deeper meaning than just “heresy” or “division.” Thayer, a leading authority on the meaning of ancient Greek words, has as his first definition of this word: the “act of taking, capture: e.g. storming a city.” Of course when you take and capture men for yourself, you do create a sect, division or “heresy.” But it seems that the thrust of the meaning here is not merely introducing a false doctrine or even a division into the house of God, but using a false or distorted teaching to capture people for your sect.

This not only brings division but also “ruin.” It harms those people who are so caught and caged. This practice damages people in several different ways. When people begin to look to and depend upon another man, they inescapably turn away from looking to and depending upon Jesus. This is an unfortunate fact. It is a very serious error and results in much spiritual loss and damage for those involved. Their intimacy with God fades as their dependence on man grows.

Also, when people find themselves in someone’s cage, they are isolated, to a greater or lesser extent, from the rest of the body of Christ and the ministry which they

can find there. Furthermore, as clearly stated by the scriptures, these groups of caged men and women are formed through distortions of the truth. Therefore, these people who are believing and following such distortions end up in darkness and do not grow spiritually as they should.

Peter makes a strong statement concerning people who act in this way. He says: "Their judgment, even though delayed, has not been cancelled and their destruction will not be postponed" (2 Pet 2:3).

Another verse which repeats this same warning is found in 2 Corinthians chapter 4, verse 2. There Paul says: "But we have renounced the hidden, shameful things and do not walk in dishonest conduct or use the word of God to snare *followers*..." (FLNT).

The *New King James Version* translates the phrase "use the word of God to snare *followers*" as "...handling the word of God deceitfully..." But this translation does not so clearly condemn the practice about which we have been speaking. Could it be that many translators have been so blinded by our present church situation which is divided up into many segments, many with their own "heads" or leaders, that they failed to transmit the substance of this verse?

The Greek word here is DOLOO which means according to Thayer and Strong, "to ensnare." This means to catch in a trap. Only by implication does it mean "to adulterate" or "corrupt" which would lead to the translation: "handling the word of God deceitfully."

Of course we have seen that those who are trying to ensnare or capture others do use the truth deceitfully. But the point of this verse is not merely about misuse of God's truth but about those who do so in order to "snare" and catch men and women for their own purposes. They do so to form and enlarge their own group of followers.

These people have other motives for what they are doing besides the glory of Christ. Such motives are often hidden from others and even from themselves since they are not beautiful. Such things as pride, ambition, competition with others, the desire for power, for fame, or for money, are often at the root of such activities.

Those who dominate others and form them into their own groups or "churches" are in search of just such fallen, fleshly things. They want to be rich. They want others to notice them. They wish to be seen and heard. They want to demonstrate powerfully and frequently their personal revelation, gifts and "ministries." They seeking to get a lot of personal benefit out of their "work for God."

Perhaps we should stop a minute and consider something here. Who was the first one to use the intelligence, "gifts," abilities, good looks, spiritual power, etc. which God had given him to attract to himself and hold a group of followers? Of course it was Lucifer whom we now know as Satan. This fact should reveal to us the source of such activity which still goes on today.

Paul recognized such human tendencies for what they were. So he said in Romans chapter 16, verses 17,18: "Now I plead with you, brethren, be wary of those who are creating divisions and trying to trap others *for their own groups which is* contrary to the teaching you learned, and turn away from them. For such people do not

serve our Lord, the Anointed One, but their own *selfish* ambitions, and through their plausible arguments and slick swords they deceive the hearts of the gullible” (FLNT).

Here Paul is again repeating this same warning. Obviously this is something which was a common problem and peril for the believers of his day. The Greek word rendered “to trap others” here has been translated in other versions as “offenses” and “obstacles” which does not transmit such a clear warning. But the Greek word used here is: SKANDALON, which, according to Strong, means: “a trap-stick (bent sapling), i.e. snare.” Thayer translates it in this way: “1) the movable stick or trigger of a trap, a trap stick 1a) a trap, snare.”

This word can also mean, by implication, “impediment” or “cause for error” but the principal meaning is the trigger of a trap. This is exactly what Paul is trying to warn the disciples about. His concern is about ambitious people cleverly using the scriptures to catch others, persuading them to follow and cling to them.

They want to trap them for their private cages. They want to catch them for their “churches” or groups. They want more members. They want their group to grow. Only through this kind of “growth” can they be seen as successful and have others respect and admire them. This danger is so real and the negative results for believers so dangerous that Paul is actually pleading with the disciples to be aware of this situation and carefully avoid it.

Paul repeats this warning in 2 Timothy 3:13 where he advises us: “But evil men – specifically those who bring others under their spell – will just get worse and worse, *both* deceiving others and being deceived themselves” (FLNT). Once again, the thrust of this verse is not very clearly transmitted by many versions which use words such as “impostors” in the place of “those who bring others under their spell.”

The actual Greek word here, GOES, means: “one who howls out enchantments, a sorcerer, enchanter.” Strong defines it as: “properly, a wizard (as muttering spells).” Although this word can mean “a deceiver” or “impostor” this meaning is only by implication and is not the principal, clearest meaning of the word.

You see, this danger is not just something from the Old Testament. It is here present with us today. There are many men and women who are using their powers to enchant others, bringing them under their spell, and so draw them under their authority and into their own group. God calls this kind of thing “evil.”

In Colossians 2:18,19 we encounter a somewhat confusing passage. The *New King James Version* renders it like this: “Let no one defraud you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the Head...”

Here we have described for us what seems to be a very rare bird. It seems to be someone who is falsely humble, worships angels and has a big, puffed up imagination. In more than 40 years of following Jesus, I have run into very few of such “creatures.” It seems strange that Paul would devote his writing to this kind of person.

This passage is very difficult to translate and understand. But I would like to submit another possible translation for your consideration. In *The Father’s Life New Testament* we read: “Don’t let anyone cheat you out of your reward by insisting on

voluntary submission *to men* and giving reverence to *human* messengers. *Such men* emphasize things which they claim to have ‘seen’ without any genuine basis whatsoever and have a overinflated, fleshly idea *of their own importance*. *When you reverence and submit to them, you are* not holding securely to the Head...”

When we look at the Greek word translation in the NKJV as “humility” we find that it is a compound word composed of two other words. One of these words means “the mind or intellect” the other can be translated “deferring servilely to others.” This then could be referring to what many in today’s church call “submission” to a man or group of men. Such submission is really an attitude of the mind as this compound Greek word indicates and does not often include the physical act of worship such as bowing down before someone. It means that someone assumes the attitude of being “submissive” to someone else. (By the way, the word in the NKJV “false” as in “false humility” does not appear in the Greek text.)

In the phrase “worship of angels” we find that the Greek word “angels” means “a messenger” or “envoy.” While this can refer to angels in the New Testament, there is also the possibility of it referring to men who are, or claim to be, sent by God.

Now, such a puffed up, fleshly person who claims to have revelation from God and wants you to humble yourself before or “submit to” him is not a rare bird at all. Today, God’s people have a great number of such self-important people among them.

But Paul shows us here that if we “reverence” them, by submitting to them, we are running the risk of being cheated out of our reward. When we submit ourselves to men we, at the same time, take our eyes off of Jesus. No man can ever work to transform our lives like He can. No amount of obeying man will do this work. Such obedience can only work to alter our outward behavior, but cannot change our heart. Only Jesus can do that.

Therefore, this interruption of our personal, intimate fellowship with Jesus together with complete reliance upon Him, retards our spiritual development. It curtails our transformation into His image, which only takes place as we are seeing and reflecting His glory (2 Cor 3:18). This then will result in a diminishing of our eternal reward when He comes. Since we all have only a limited amount of time in our lives, we should use this time to gain as much of Jesus as we can and not waste it following men.

Many believers are sincere. They want to do the right thing. But many are also very innocent, sort of like sheep. Therefore, when someone who seems to be impressive comes along claiming to have a revelation from God and begins to dominate them, many are easily led off captive. They are easy to deceive and manipulate.

Paul confirms the truth of such a vulnerability of believers when he writes: “For you put up with someone if he brings you into bondage *to himself*, if he takes *your money*, if he takes advantage of you, if he exalts himself, or *even* if he strikes you on the face! I say this in disgust...” (2 Cor 11:20,21 FLNT).

Please notice how this passage seems to repeat, in a condensed form, what all the other verses we have examined are saying. Such persons who are in search of personal fame and influence do several things. They bring God’s people into bondage, take their money, take advantage of them by using their time and energies to build up

their own personal kingdoms and exalt themselves. This is truly a slap in the face! Yet how many of God's children today tolerate and even advocate such things!

One of the principal deceitful arguments which men use to catch and hold others in their cages is that they are doing this for the benefit of those whom they have caught. They are being "helpful" to them. Perhaps they are protecting them from some imagined danger of false doctrine or other error. Possibly they are instructing them in some special belief system or practice that other's don't "understand" since they are not as enlightened as that particular leader. The deceitfulness of such leaders is to make the "members" believe that it is they themselves who are being benefitted instead of the leader(s) of the group.

Yet Jesus taught us: "The kings of the Gentiles have dominion over them and those exercising authority over them are called 'Benefactors.' But you may not do so! Instead, he who is 'great' among you, let him become as a newborn child and he who is an outstanding example in the spiritual life, let him be as a servant" (Lk 22:25,26 FLNT).

You see, even if those who are claiming to be leaders say that they are "benefactors" or, in others words, doing something beneficial for the people under their control, it has been prohibited by Jesus. For one believer to have dominion – any kind of dominion – over another believer has been strictly prohibited by our Lord.

He is the be the one and only Leader. He is our true Master, Head and King. Anyone else who rises up to dominate a smaller group of believers is entering into competition with Jesus Himself. This is a work which God labels as "evil." It divides His body. This kind of human domination stifles the intimacy with Jesus of believers and so retards their spiritual development. Jesus is both able and willing to lead all of His people.

Interestingly, John in his epistles warns us constantly of something he calls "antichrist." This word is composed of two Greek words "ANTI" and "CHRISTOS." Of course CHRISTOS means "the Anointed One" or Christ. In English the word "anti" principally means "against," so we would normally think of an antichrist as someone who is against Christ. But in ancient Greek, the word "anti" has another prominent and important meaning. It means "instead of," "substitution for" or "in the place of." This then would mean that anyone who is taking the place of or substituting for Christ in the lives of believers must be considered an antichrist. This definition fits well with the activities which we have been investigating.

MONEY

It is true that in many places in the scriptures we are admonished to financially support those who are doing the work of God. Yet this is very different from financing those who are doing their own work but using God's name. There are many who are using the scriptures along with their personal gifts, charisma, etc. to support themselves and even get rich. Sadly, today there are leaders of groups of believers who are not only practicing this error, but advocating it as if it were something from God.

Yet the example of the Bible is something entirely different. Paul explains his actions like this: “For we are not like so many others, turning the word of God into a money-making business. But instead, having no ulterior motives, we speak from God in the Anointed One – God *himself* being our witness” (2 Cor 2:17 FLNT).

Thayer defines the Greek word KAPELEUO, which here is rendered “a money-making business,” as: 1) to be a retailer, to peddle to make money by selling anything 2a) to get sordid gain by dealing in anything, to do a thing for base gain.

But Paul had another attitude. His “ministry” was not for himself, but was used to serve others. His support did not come from his manipulation of others, but from God. He did not look to men for his financial needs, but to the Lord Jesus alone. He was careful to do everything honestly and from a pure heart, being completely transparent before men and God Himself. He was not looking to become rich or famous, but only to please his Master.

In fact, Paul had a very stern, negative attitude towards those who tried to use the good news as a means of support. In 2 Corinthians chapter 11 he explains that he did not take money from the Corinthians while he was there among them. He says he “...proclaimed the good news of God to [them] free of charge” (vs 7). He explains that “In everything I kept myself from being a financial burden to you...” (vs 9).

And why did he do this? Why did he act in this way? He did it to expose and stop those who were abusing others financially, pretending to be “servants of God” while feathering their own nest with the believer’s money. These were men who were using God’s work to enrich themselves.

In 2 Corinthians 11, verses 12-15 we read: “But what I do, I will continue to do, so that I may cut off the opportunity of those whose purpose is to get resources {raise money} for their “ministries,” boasting that they are supported in the same way we are. For such men [those who seek money from men] are false sent ones who work deceitfully, transforming themselves into sent ones of the Anointed One. And it is no wonder, for even Satan transforms himself into an angel of light. It is no great thing, therefore, if his servants also transform themselves into “ministers of righteousness” whose end will be according to their works” (FLNT).

The Greek word translated above “whose purpose is to get resources {raise money}” is APHORME which, according to Thayer can be translated “the resources we avail ourselves of in attempting or performing anything.” The phrase: “that they are supported” is from the word HEURISKO which can mean, according to Thayer, “to acquire, get, obtain, procure.”

The Father’s Life Version has a footnote about this passage which I will include here: “It is true that believers are taught to financially support those who do God’s work. However, such workers must NEVER look to men for their needs but only to God. If and when such men begin to urge, pressure, and beg other men to support them, they have left the will of God. They have begun to walk in the flesh using earthly techniques. When God sends someone, he supplies all their needs from his abundant riches. When men send themselves to ‘work for God,’ being led by their own pride, ambition, etc., then they must manipulate others for their support. Paul’s assessment of such ‘workers’ is

must manipulate others for their support. Paul's assessment of such 'workers' is very harsh yet true. Such fleshly, human efforts are, at their roots, Satanic."

So we see that every believer is faced with certain traps. He or she is in danger of being caught by some leader or other and put in their personal group. They are in danger of being used by unscrupulous leaders who gain fame, status and wealth from the "birds" in their cages. However, our Lord has already warned us about this peril. He has given us many scriptures to help us avoid such a consequence. We will all do well to obey Him.

The purpose of this writing is **not** to discourage Christians from reaching out to others and then trying to help them grow up into Christ. We should all be involved daily in this work. Yet our job is to make disciples for Christ, not for ourselves or our "church group." Our gifts and ministries should be dedicated to serving others and not ourselves. Our financial supply and, in fact, all our supply must come from heaven and not from men. We must learn to rely on God and Him alone.

It is important for all of us to walk in the light. We should understand what we are doing and why we are doing it. We should be careful to do our work for God in His way so that our works will pass all future tests. We must also be aware of what others are doing and be able to discern if what they are doing is purely for God or involves some selfish motives. This is a topic of which it is important for all Christians to be aware.

David W. Dyer