

Under God's Authority

(Some thoughts with Dr. Joel M. Crichlow)

In the Apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesian church he states the following:

"I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come." Ephesians 1: 17-21 (NIV).

We live under authority. Indeed we are in several domains of authority: e.g. home, school, workplace, town, state, country. In some cases the authority can be very oppressive and uncaring, but in many instances that authority upholds justice and seeks our welfare. However, as the Apostle Paul emphasized, Father God has placed God the Son (Jesus Christ) far above all other authority. Ultimately we are under God's authority.

The Israelites spent a period of their history, some 400 plus years (Exodus 12: 40), in Egypt. They suffered as slaves under the very oppressive and cruel regimes of the pharaohs. God used Moses as His agent to bring about their deliverance from Egypt. Under the leadership of Moses, God's delegated authority over the Israelites, they were headed to the promise land, Canaan, along a journey that was not without serious challenges. Many of these challenges arose due to their own behavior.

The following passage from Numbers 21: 4-7 (NIV) recounts an occurrence on a phase of their journey:

"They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!'

Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.

The people came to Moses and said, 'We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.' So Moses prayed for the people."

As indicated in the passage, the Israelites were dissatisfied with conditions and so they started to rebel against the authorities – God and Moses. Some Biblical scholarship indicates that they were more than one million Israelites involved in the exodus from Egypt. We do not know what percentage of that number were speaking against God and Moses. But this was an ominous situation and so the Authority had to act. When we rebel against authority we separate ourselves from the favor and the blessings of that authority. Rebellion produces separation.

When the authority seeks the welfare and interest of the subjects, that authority will act in a way to restore the relationship with the subjects. An effective way to do this is to let the rebellious feel the pain of separation. In feeling that pain the subjects should reflect seriously on the actions that brought on the separation and the pain. It is then wise for the subjects to desire the removal of the pain and the restoration of the favorable relationship with the authority.

God had (still has) a good plan for the Israelites. It was necessary that a path be provided so that the Israelites could be restored to a position of favor with God. God used snakes so that the Israelites would suffer the consequences of their rebellion and feel the pain of their separation from God's favor.

The Israelites reflected, they acknowledged their sin and sought God's mercy. God outlined a way back:

"The Lord said to Moses, 'Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.'

So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived." Numbers 21: 8-9 (NIV)

No death for those who in faith looked at the bronze snake. Did everyone who was bitten look at the bronze snake? We do not know. Maybe there were some who did not believe that looking really meant life. Of course it would have been foolish not to look. Maybe everyone who was bitten made the wise decision. They looked and lived.

How does this incident of rebellion against authority, separation from authority, and restoration of a favorable relationship with authority affect us? All of us as sinners are in rebellion against our supreme authority, God. That rebellion resulted in our separation from God. That separation means spiritual death leading to eternal death, unless there is restoration. Two pertinent scripture passages are:

Romans 3: 23 (NIV), *"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."*

Romans 6: 23 (NIV), *"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

We feel this separation from God in several ways. We are discontented, restless, aimless, confused, lost. The author of the book of Ecclesiastes expresses it this way:

Ecclesiastes 1: 2 (NIV), *"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."*

The wise thing to do when in this confused, lost, meaningless state of separation from God is to find the way back to God. In the Gospel of John we see one of our fellow separated ones, Nicodemus, finding that way to God.

John 3:1-2 (NIV), *"Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a*

teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.’”

Nicodemus did not state directly why he came to Jesus. But it was obvious to Jesus that Nicodemus, in spite of his high social status, recognized that he was missing something. Jesus knew what Nicodemus’s problem was. He was separated from God and he needed to be restored. He needed to find his place as an obedient and faithful subject under God’s authority. He needed to be brought into God’s kingdom, i.e. he needed to be rightly related to God. Therefore Jesus wasted no time in getting to the point.

John 3:3-10 (NIV), *“Jesus replied, ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.’*

‘How can someone be born when they are old?’ Nicodemus asked. ‘Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!’

Jesus answered, ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.

You should not be surprised at my saying, “You must be born again”. The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.’

‘How can this be?’ Nicodemus asked.”

Jesus continued:

John 3:14-15 (NIV), *“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”*

The message “You must be born again” was puzzling to Nicodemus. But Nicodemus was very familiar with the incident in the wilderness where Moses lifted up the snake. Jesus was saying to him that the Israelites who looked in faith at the snake on the pole lived, and that everyone who looks in faith at him on the cross will have eternal life. True life – a blessed place under God’s authority – awaits the one who believes. We do not know if Nicodemus got the full implication of this message at that time. But he may have figured that this was going to require the death of Jesus. But why?

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16 (NIV).

It is because of God’s love. Jesus was lifted up so as to bear the full pain of our separation from God and to provide the way for our restoration back to God. Separation does not have to last forever. God has provided the way back to Him through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Nicodemus must have followed very closely everything that subsequently unfolded in the life of Jesus. He was not going to miss that scene when the Son of Man was lifted up. Nicodemus had had enough of living a life separated from God: outside of His favor, outside of His Kingdom. It is clear from the following scripture reference that Nicodemus did look at Jesus

lifted up on the cross. His thoughts must have returned to that night-time conversation he had with Jesus, and with a heart overwhelmed with gratitude and emotion he probably said “I do believe”.

John 19:38-40 (NIV), “Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate’s permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus’ body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs.”

Nicodemus was identified with a group of people, the Pharisees, who did not take very kindly to Jesus. Yet he found his way to Jesus and evidently accepted the gift of eternal life. He was restored to a place of favor under God’s authority. We can do the same. It is the wise thing to do. Why continue to suffer the pain of separation from God when God has provided the way for us to be restored to Him? Furthermore having been restored to God we can continue to make wise choices. Among the favors God is willing to grant us is a generous supply of wisdom:

James 1:5 (NIV), “If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.”