

## Conclusion

As Jesus sat on the Mount of Olives His disciples asked Him, 'Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the consummation of the age?' (Mat 24:3). He warned them of false prophets, wars, famines and earthquakes and then added, 'All these things are the beginning of birth pangs' (24: 8). You only need to buy a newspaper or switch on the news to discover that the whole creation is groaning and travailing at this very moment! We need not wait for some far off day to see these things fulfilled. The time is now.

Even now, if we are not caught up with the affairs of the world, and the lusts of the flesh and the works of Babylon, we will know the inward groaning and travail of the Holy Spirit interceding within us. We will know that God has something infinitely greater than the religious meetings we have attended, something far beyond our own meagre experience, something much more than creation has yet seen of his manifest power.

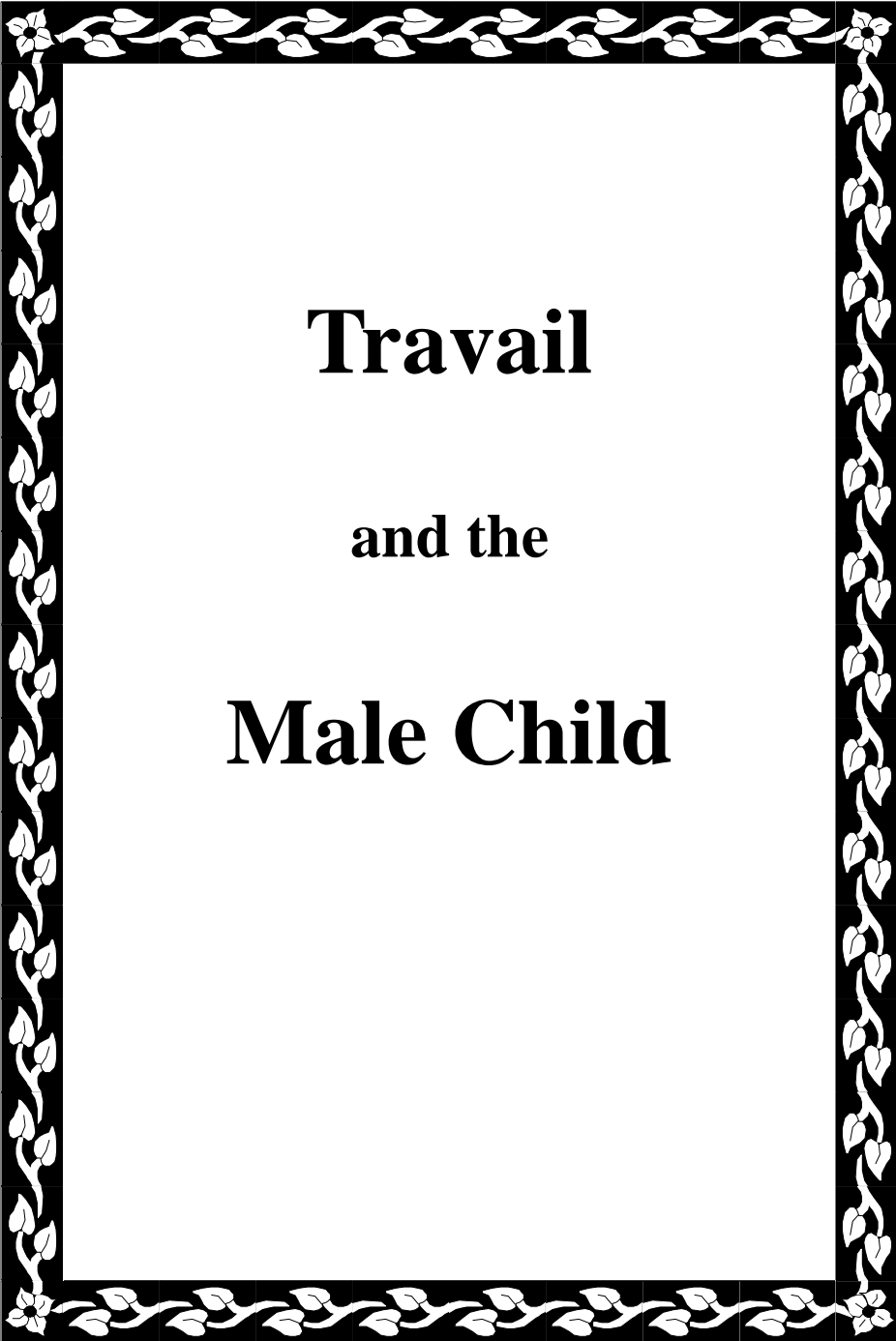
Secretly and silently as the child is formed in the womb, so God is preparing sons. The great day when they will be manifested to the whole creation cannot now be far away. We will see and feel the travail of their preparation in the coming years till they come to birth. We see the world's turmoil all around us, but the sorrow of its travail will soon be turned into joy when Jesus comes to set up his righteous kingdom. Let us lift up our hearts in anticipation and rejoice and pray with confidence the prayer of Jesus: 'Your kingdom come.'

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# Travail and the Male Child

## Introduction

Early in human history when God pronounced the curse on Eve, he said, 'In pain you will bring forth children'. The travail and pain of childbirth is a theme to which the Scriptures frequently return. Rachel died in travail as she brought Benjamin to birth. Jesus spoke of the sorrows of a travailing woman, and her joy when the child is born. In Revelation chapter 12, John sees a vision of a woman travailing to give birth to a child while a fiery dragon waited to devour it.

God has ordained that travail in the natural realm should have its counterpart in the spiritual.

In this writing I want to look at some of the scriptures that relate to spiritual travail and its results.

## Raising of Lazarus

We'll begin our study with the account of Jesus' raising of Lazarus, found in chapter 11 of John's gospel. Like many other Bible narratives, this story is capable of a superficial interpretation and also a deeper one. We can and must learn the lessons which this passage teaches on the surface. Jesus faces death with complete authority. He treats Martha and Mary with such tenderness and compassion. He has total faith that God will hear his prayer. He uses the occasion to teach the great truth of the resurrection.

All these things appear on the surface of this story, but there is much more hidden underneath. In verse 33 we read that Jesus was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled. In verse 35 we read that Jesus wept. In verse 38 again we see Jesus 'deeply moved within'. The original Greek verb (ἐμβριμαομαι) in fact carries the sense of anger. The emotions Jesus felt can easily be explained by the grief he witnessed in Mary and Martha and all their friends. That was the natural explanation, but only the beginning. He moved from the natural into a powerful spiritual travail which brought Lazarus out of the tomb.

So before Jesus issued the authoritative command that brought Lazarus out of the tomb, he had already travailed in prayer and brought the miracle to birth.

On two other occasions Jesus raised the dead. In Luke chapter 7 he raised the widow of Nain's son and in Luke chapter 8 he raised Jairus' daughter. Interestingly, in neither case do we read of a travail as with Lazarus. On the other two occasions he just spoke the word 'Arise', and they arose. What was the difference? The command Jesus gave to Lazarus was not 'Lazarus, come back to life', as perhaps we might have expected, but 'Lazarus, come out' from the tomb. Jesus did not recognise death. Where man saw death he only saw sleep. He was and is the Resurrection and the Life, and in His presence there was and is no death. His travail was not to bring Lazarus back to life, but rather to bring him out of the tomb. Jairus' daughter and the

Moses stretched out his rod with divine authority in Egypt. How perfectly these different scriptures relate to and confirm each other.

James and John one day asked Jesus, 'Grant that we may sit in your glory, one on your right, and one on your left.' Jesus immediately asked them, 'Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptised with the baptism with which I am baptised?' Those called to sit at his right hand and share his throne must also share his sufferings. This they said they were able to do. Even so Jesus told them, 'To sit on my right or on my left is not mine to give; but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.'

The call to sonship is also a call to suffering. Even of Jesus it is written that 'Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which he suffered' (Heb 5:8). If we aspire to share his throne how much more must we first learn obedience. The essence of sonship is being led by the Spirit of God. This implies an obedience which has been learnt through suffering and death to the self-life. 'If we suffer', Paul wrote to Timothy, 'we shall also reign with Him' (2 Tim 2:12).

Two further witnesses testify to the travail that precedes the birth of the male child. 'Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth ... Let the day perish on which I was to be born, and the night which said, 'A male child is conceived'' (Job 3: 1-3). Jeremiah in very similar language says, 'Cursed be the day when I was born; let the day not be blessed when my mother bore me! Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, saying, 'A male child has been born to you.'" (Jer 20:14-15).

The name *Mary* meaning *bitterness* also tells us the same story. Jesus, the head of the male body and first manifest son of God, was born from bitterness.

We must return to Revelation 12. In verses 3 and 4 we read that a fiery dragon stood before the woman, so that when she gave birth he might devour her child. The birth of this male child is accompanied both by inward travail and by outward conflict. It was the same in Egypt at the birth of the nation. There was a Pharaoh to destroy each male child as soon as it was born. It was the same when Jesus was born at Bethlehem. Soon Herod was killing all the male children under two years old. The manifestation of this male child means the end of Satan's dominion. He will oppose it to the limit of his power.

The catching up of the male child to the throne is followed by war in heaven in verse 7. In verse 9 the great dragon or Satan is thrown down. In verse 10 a loud voice in heaven proclaims that the kingdom of God and the authority of His Christ have come. No wonder Satan resists the birth of this male child.

## Birth of the Male Child

Chapter 12 of the book of Revelation describes the birth of a male child. 'A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and a crown of twelve stars on her head; and she was pregnant; and she cried out in pain as she was about to give birth ... and she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron; and her child was snatched up to God and to his throne' (vv 1, 2, 5).

We see here a link with Romans 8. In both we see travail. The birth of the male child exactly parallels the revealing of the sons of God. A birth is not the creation of a life. It is the revealing or manifestation of a life already present. The baby inside the mother's womb is as complete and alive as the baby after it is born. It is just hidden from view waiting till the time comes and the birth pangs make it visible to the world.

This male child is snatched up to the throne, as he is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. It is for this righteous rule that now the whole creation groans and travails.

This portion of scripture has increasing significance when we compare the woman to Jacob's wife Rachel. Her first son Joseph had a dream of the sun and the moon and eleven stars bowing down to him. Rachel suffered severe labour and died as she gave birth to Benjamin. With her last breath she named him *Ben-oni, son of my sorrow*. Jacob changed his name to *Ben-yamin, son of the right hand* (Gen 35:16-18).

Joseph, as most Bible students know, is the clearest of all the Old Testament types of Jesus. He was the much loved son of his father. He was rejected by his brethren and thrown into the pit and then into prison before he was exalted to the right hand of Pharaoh. Many other details of his life correspond to and foreshadow the life of Jesus. Rachel gave him the name of *Joseph* meaning *He shall add*. After her long barrenness she was not going to be content with only one son. God would add another to her though she died in giving birth to him. This second child was Benjamin. To his mother he was *Ben-oni*, the son of her sorrow; to his father he was *Ben-yamin*, the son of his right hand.

The male child of Revelation 12 can clearly be identified with Joseph or Jesus who we know is going to rule the nations with a rod of iron. Equally clearly this male child must include Benjamin, the son of the right hand. It is evident from Revelation 3: 26, 27 that Jesus will not be alone when he rules the nations. Those who 'overcome' and 'keep his deeds to the end' will 'receive authority over the nations' and 'rule them with a rod of iron'. Joseph will not be alone on the throne. God will surely add a Benjamin to be at his right hand.

In passing we may note that 'rule with a rod of iron' from Psalm 2 is quoted in the Greek in Revelation as 'shepherd with a rod of iron'. God's first great shepherd

widow of Nain's son never reached the tomb and hence there was no travail to bring them out.

Lazarus came out of the tomb 'bound hand and foot' and 'his face wrapped around with a cloth'. Jesus issued his second command to the bystanders, 'Unbind him and let him go.' Firstly Lazarus must come out of the place of death, and secondly he must be free from all its traces. So also must you and I.

The true church throughout the last two thousand years has dwelt largely in the tomb. The visible organised church has been her sepulchre. The grave clothes of religion have bound her hand and foot and covered her mouth with a cloth. Her hands have been mainly inactive, her feet unable to walk, and her mouth seldom able to speak the words of life. The true life of God has been present in her members, but hidden like a light beneath a bushel.

The two commands of Jesus sound like music in our ears: 'Lazarus come out'; 'Unbind him and let him go'. We must let him speak these words individually to us that our hands may be active in his service, our feet free to walk in the spirit, and our mouths opened to eat and speak the words of life.

## Gethsemane

The travail Jesus underwent to bring Lazarus from the grave was a foretaste of his agony ten days later in the garden of Gethsemane. In Luke's account (22:44) we read, 'Being in an agony he was praying very fervently; and his sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground.' Matthew (26:38) and Mark (14:34) record his words, 'My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death.'

What, we may humbly enquire, was taking place at this most sacred moment of his life? In Hebrews 5:7 we find an answer. 'In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him out of death, and He was heard because of His reverence.' Jesus was interceding, travailing and agonising for his own resurrection. What had happened with Lazarus ten days earlier was just a prelude to something infinitely greater. Lazarus came back to continue his earthly existence for perhaps another thirty years before he trod the pathway of death again. Jesus himself rose to everlasting life in permanent triumph over the grave.

As in the case of Lazarus, when the travail is over we see Jesus moving forward with quietness and confidence to a conflict with death in which he has already obtained the victory.

Jesus travailed in Gethsemane for his own resurrection, but it was not for his alone. His resurrection was the birth of the new creation. He himself was the first-born from the dead (Col 1:18).

## The Exodus

We see the same principle of travail for birth in the Exodus from Egypt. For at least 80 long years the Egyptians afflicted the Israelites. Their hard labour began before Moses was born. It was continuing when he was 40 years old before he fled to the wilderness; and it did not cease till God sent him back 40 years later to lead the people out of Egypt. 80 years of bitterness and affliction preceded the birth of the nation. To this we can add that a yet more bitter travail preceded Israel's recent resurrection from her grave among the nations. 6 million Jews perished in the Nazi holocaust, before, 3 years later Israel took its place among the nations of the world.

God said to Moses, 'I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and I have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sufferings.' (Ex 3:7). 'I have seen ... I have heard ... I know'; and God says the same to us in our afflictions.

In addition to the affliction of the children of Israel I believe there was a painful travail in the heart of Moses. Little is recorded of the 40 weary years he spent in the land of Midian. We are told only that he kept the flock of Jethro his father-in-law. He had been a royal prince in the land of Egypt. Now he took up the profession that was an abomination to the Egyptians (Gen 46:34) and became a shepherd. And as a shepherd he did not even keep his own sheep, nor even his own father's sheep, but his wife's father's sheep. All his ambitions to deliver his people had failed and he was a fugitive in a foreign land. No doubt there was pain in his heart.

All this travail was not in vain. It was the prelude to the greatest outward display of divine power recorded in scripture and the birth of the chosen race. Moses returned from the wilderness like Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit and stood before Pharaoh with all the authority of God. Egypt could not stand before him. As Lazarus came out of the tomb so Israel came out of Egypt; and Moses used almost the same words as Jesus: 'Let my people go'. Truly God's people do not weep in vain.

## Romans Chapter 8

If we want to find a more explicit scripture for our subject we must turn to Romans chapter 8. In verses 22 to 27 we see a threefold travail described. Firstly Paul says that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth until now. Secondly he adds that we ourselves groan within ourselves; and thirdly he adds that the Spirit also intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.

Till now we have been considering some of the fruits of past travail in the scriptures. In this passage our attention is turned to the present and the future. Doubtless these verses were true of the time when Paul wrote them; but I believe their greater application is to the present. I believe the groaning of the whole creation has greatly increased since his day. According to the World Bank 800 million people live in absolute poverty, and the Food and Agriculture organisation says that 500

million people in the world are seriously undernourished; while in the western world people struggle to lose weight! The majority of the world's population groans under evil oppressive regimes and millions live in constant fear. How much better, we may well ask, are our civilised western countries where multitudes suffer the miseries of unemployment, broken homes and mental breakdowns? There can be little doubt that creation is now groaning more than ever before and the intensity of the travail is still increasing.

What will be the fruit of this present travail? Verse 19 tells us that the anxious (or earnest) longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing (or manifestation) of the sons of God. The creation is utterly sick and weary of human mismanagement. It awaits its rightful rulers. Only the righteous rule of Jesus and those who share the throne with Him can rectify its endless wrongs.

The scripture speaks here of sons, but we must understand the language of the Spirit. The male in scripture speaks of authority while the female has a different spiritual significance. Irrespective of our sex in the natural, we may enter into the fullness of sonship in the spirit.

'We ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body' (v 23). What is this adoption? Has it not already taken place? In a sense no doubt it has. John writes, 'Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not yet appeared what we shall be. We know that when He appears, we shall be like Him' (1 John 3:2). At the same time it appears that there is a much greater fulfilment yet to come. 'The sufferings of this present time', says Paul, 'are not worthy to be compared to the glory that is going to be revealed to us' (v 18). Verse 29 makes this adoption clearer: 'For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.' The fullness of sonship is nothing less than conformity to the likeness of Jesus Christ. His many brothers must not be perpetually dwarfed by their Older Brother's stature, as still we must so often sadly confess ourselves to be. They must grow up into his fullness. That is the hope for which we have our inward travail. That also is the desire of the whole creation. No one else is fit to rule the creation other than Jesus Christ and those who have become conformed to his likeness. It is for this immense transformation that we travail within our souls.

How do we participate in this travail? 'The Spirit also helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express; and he who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because he intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will' (vv 26, 27). Jesus, we read in verse 34, intercedes for us at God's right hand. The intercession of the Holy Spirit is inside us. We cannot stir up spiritual travail. Rather by emptying ourselves of worldly trivialities, human ambitions and other encumbrances, we become available to the Holy Spirit to use as He pleases.