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The Law of Travail

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"Unto the woman he [God] said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children... And unto Adam he said... cursed is the ground for thy sake; in toil (sorrow) shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; ...in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread" (Genesis 3:16,17,19).

"The creation was subjected to vanity... For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain..." (Romans 8:20,22).

The presence of the law of travail in the whole creation is beyond dispute. That it was something imposed by the Creator because of sin is a fundamental truth of the Bible. That it is something not in the first thought of God, but something running counter to man's nature, is common experience. But we are left to draw from God's act and the Bible's teaching the meaning and necessity of travail. What that meaning is lies at the heart of this present meditation.

It can be put very precisely in this way: What costs little is little valued. What comes easily is let go easily. What we suffer over becomes precious. What we labour for is not despised, but jealously guarded. And so on.

That brings us to a surmise and a deduction as to the introduction of this law. But note, the law was not established with partiality. Not only was the woman to be subjected to it, but man also. Then we are told that "the whole creation... travaileth".

The surmise and deduction to which we are brought is that the behaviour of Adam and Eve in the garden implied or indicated a serious lack of reverence and esteem. Everything was made for them and given to them as a trust and a responsibility. They were the custodians of Divine interests.

Nothing was an end in itself; all was full of glorious potentialities, to be sacredly guarded and let out to full realisation. It would seem that all was taken too much for granted and as a matter of course. An adequate and governing sense of values was lacking, and they just looked upon everything in the light of how it served *their* pleasure. This weakness and lack was fully exploited by the discerning tempter, and was made the ground of his assault. Hence, the law of travail was established to counter this disposition. Man must be made to realise that God places a value upon His gifts, and that everything in His mind is costly and precious. What we are not prepared to suffer for we lightly esteem. This is surely and so clearly seen in redemption. Whether it be basic redemption in the Cross of Christ, or the progressive redemption in the Christian's life, or the consummation of redemption in the 'creation's deliverance from the bondage of corruption', and the 'manifestation of the sons of God', all is at very great cost and through deep and anguished travail. Christ sees His seed through the travail of His soul. The Church and true Christians come to spiritual fulness through "the fellowship of his sufferings". The creation itself will come to glory through great upheavals and anguish. The Bible says and shows all this.

But to return to the specific point and its application. If God gives freely and richly He will look for and expect a reverent and serious regard for, respect for, and appraisal of His gifts, as for a sacred trust and responsibility. The presentation of salvation is often too cheap, and that unspeakably costly thing is made a matter of the pleasure of the recipient. The result is that when the true value is involved in a testing ordeal of trial and adversity, many are disappointed and go away. They have not seen that it is something of such value as to be worth suffering for.

If the Lord gives a rich and costly ministry to His people, sooner or later they will pass into a time which will be nothing less than deep and desperate travail, and that ministry will be tested as to how much it really means to those to whom it has been given. The same is true with regard to those who minister. A true servant of God is one in whom, through suffering and passion, that which he gives has been born. His ministry must carry the impress of deep history with God. A merely ritualistic, liturgical service, however devoutly performed, will not produce spiritual men and women. It may make people religious, but that can be true in realms other than Christianity.

Christ's travail was not because there was no religion. There was an abundance of it in Jerusalem and elsewhere. But there was little or no sense of the costliness of God's gifts. Two thousand years of anguish in the case of Israel is God's way of showing that His greatest Gift - Jesus Christ, His Son - cannot be so lightly regarded and disposed of as Israel thought.

The travail of a mother has much to do with her love for her children, unless she is wholly unnatural and subnormal. When the farmer or gardener has toiled and laboured, and spent anxious days and nights over his harvest, he does not lightly esteem the seed or the soil, but cherishes and cares for it.

Let us look at suffering and adversity as God's way of seeking to bring us into His estimate of what He has given. 'He that has suffered most, has most to give.'