

# The Principle of Travail

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The principle of travail is a law established by God that anything of value requires effort, struggle, and cost to achieve, and it is a means by which God tests our heart-relationship with Him and brings out the preciousness and reality of our faith.*

**Scripture:** Isaiah 53:10, Galatians 6:16

**Topics:** "Spiritual Growth", "Suffering and Triumph"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the principle of travail as a divine law established after the fall, linking it to the justification of life through reproduction and the necessity of suffering for spiritual growth. He illustrates that true spiritual value comes at a cost, and that God's purposes are birthed through struggle and pain, ultimately leading to triumph and enlargement. The sermon highlights the significance of travail in both the natural and spiritual realms, asserting that it reveals the depth of our commitment to God and the preciousness of His work in us. Sparks encourages believers to embrace the challenges of life as opportunities for spiritual formation and to recognize the true Israel of God as those who endure through travail.

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## Transcript

The seed plot of this series of meditations is found in a little fragment at the end of the letter to the Galatians:

"And as many as shall walk by this rule, peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God"(Galatians 6:16).

We will put alongside of that some other passages.

"Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied" (Isaiah 53:10,11).

"Who hath heard such a thing? who hath seen such things? Shall a land be born in one day? shall a nation be brought forth at once? for as soon as Zion travailed, she brought forth her children" (Isaiah 66:8).

"Therefore will he give them up, until the time that she which travaileth hath brought forth: then the residue of his brethren shall return unto the children of Israel" (Micah 5:3).

"For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And... we ourselves groan... waiting for... adoption... the redemption of our body " (Romans 8:22,23).

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, that ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice: ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy. A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but when she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for the joy that a man is born into the world" (John 16:20,21).

"My little children, of whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you..." (Galatians 4:19).

Now let us bring together particularly that phrase from Galatians 6:16: "The Israel of God", and the fragments in Isaiah 53:10 and 11: "He shall see his seed"; "He shall see of the travail of his soul". "His seed... the travail of his soul".

We have before us a very full, deep and far-reaching matter: nothing less than that of the producing, securing, training, and using of a spiritual seed -- a new spiritual Israel. We begin with a brief consideration of a principle, found in a word occurring in all but one of the above passages -- the principle of travail.

Let us first of all remind ourselves that this is a law which God established after the fall. There is an established law of travail. You will recall what the Lord said, first to the woman, and then to the man, as recorded in Genesis 3:16-19. He there linked this law in two realms with production and reproduction: in one connection with children; in the other connection with the earth. And in these two connections of the law of travail we find three things.

#### Reproduction, and Hence Travail, the Justification of Life

First of all, the very justification of life is in reproduction, in multiplication, in a seed. Life is never intended to be an end in itself. Its only justification, according to God's law and principle, is that it reproduces. And so the law of travail is linked with reproduction. That runs through the whole realm of grace, and through a large part of the realm of nature. But if there is no reproduction without travail, then the travail becomes the basis of the justification of existence. That is something much deeper than perhaps appears. One might put it like this, quite bluntly: If we are without travail, there is no justification for our existence. We shall come back to that later.

That was implicit in what God said to the woman. Then He turned to the man and spoke about the travail of his labour -- of the ground bringing forth thorns and briars, that it would be by the sweat of his brow that the ground produced, and that this was the preservation and sustentation of life. This was the justification of life: the preservation and sustentation of life on the principle of travail.

And then, of course, in both cases the issue is a triumph. That is made perfectly clear in both connections. Paul puts his finger upon that, you remember, in his letter to Timothy (1 Tim. 2:13-15). Yes, travail, but triumph. God will see you through in spite of it. It is the triumph of life in both connections -- the children and the earth; it issues as a testimony to something having been overcome, a victory over forces at work which would prevent or make it infinitely difficult. Travail, you see, is God's law by which He is not defeated. That is where the test comes always for us: HE is not defeated. Out of the adversity, out of the difficulty, out of the suffering, something stands as a great testimony to triumph, to victory.

#### Travail Implies Something Costly

Now note the implication of this principle of travail -- and there are many connections in which the law of travail operates: just go through the Bible and see the great number of connections where struggle and conflict and pain and anguish presages the emergence of some tremendous new thing of God. But note the implication of such a law. What did God mean by it? I think simply this -- and perhaps much more, but certainly this -- that nothing was going to be easy and cheap. To put it another way: that God was really establishing the tremendous value of everything. He was saving man from regarding things as being of little concern or value, forcing him to recognise that this thing is costly because it is valuable. Surely this is the offset to the whole tendency of man's nature to get things easily and cheaply, not to pay a price for them, to escape suffering, to escape labour, to get it all without any cost. And God has written in the universe this law that anything that is of Him, whether in creation or in grace, has a price attached to it, is a costly thing; it is infinitely precious and valuable, and worth suffering for!

Note, it is intended to bring the soul in -- "the travail of his SOUL"; "My SOUL is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death" -- to bring the soul into relation with things; and when we say that we mean love. What we get cheaply and easily we do not really love. But that which costs binds our hearts to it -- it becomes a matter of the heart, of love. And so by travail the soul is saved from lightness, carelessness, frivolity, cheapness, and brought to recognise that there is something here that is infinitely precious. How far-reaching is that truth and that law! What a lot of ground it covers! God is not going to let the creation off in this matter. This is the explanation of so much. And nations and peoples that just give themselves up to frivolity, to cheapness, to escapism and all that sort of thing, are on the high road to a bad time in their history. It will not be too long before they pass through some fiery ordeal, in order to bring back the preciousness and the seriousness of things.

And if this is true in the realm of nature and the world, how much it explains in the realm of God's spiritual things! Oh, the infinite tragedy of trying to make the things of God cheap and easy -- even salvation, and the Christian life! -- appealing always to the pleasure side of men, trying to eliminate the cost. The Lord Jesus never did that. Salvation is something of infinite cost: everything to do with salvation is infinitely precious, and there is not one fragment of all that is of God which is not of surpassing and transcendent value. It is not just going to be had willy-nilly. "Through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). Yes, suffering is attached to anything of value, and that is particularly true of spiritual things.

At that very point, you and I need to have our minds "converted" -- we need a tremendous change of mind. Unless you recognise that, unless that has become true for you, there are some things in the Bible you cannot understand. They sound flippant, garrulous; they sound as though they are just words, words, words... Listen: "Our light affliction, which is for the moment..." (2 Cor. 4:17). What are you talking about, Paul -- "our light affliction"? Well, listen to his catalogue of sufferings! Listen to him as he tells us of all that he had to go through for the Gospel's sake, and read the much more that Luke tells us, that Paul never mentions personally. What that beloved servant of God went through for the Gospel's sake --! And yet he talks like this: "Our light affliction which is but for a passing moment". You cannot talk like that in the presence of suffering unless you have seen the infinite preciousness of that toward which God is working and bringing you. "Though now for a little while... ye have been put to grief in manifold trials, yet... ye rejoice greatly with joy unspeakable and full of glory..." (1 Pet. 1:6,8). Now look at the context of that: fiery trials. You cannot get through, understand, endure the travail, unless you have some sense of the value of things.

All Divine Operations Effected Through Travail

### (a) Initiations

This law is carried through from nature to the purpose of God, to the divine purpose, and is seen in the Scriptures to be the principle or law of all divine realisations. If you look again, you will see that in all new beginnings, in all the initiations of God, this law is ever present. Everything of God emerges from some agony, from some convulsion, from some death struggle. Look at your Bible again. It is like that all the way through: without or within, some tremendous travail marks every new beginning of God. Can you put your finger upon any instance in the Bible where God began again and there was no association with the principle of travail? You will have difficulty. It is the law of birth, you see, and it relates to the spiritual world, the purpose of God, just as much as to any other realm.

### (b) Enlargements

And what is true of God's beginnings and initiations, is true of every enlargement. Whenever God sets Himself for increase, for enlargement, to get something more than that which He has already got, it seems that He plunges things anew into travail. Every spring-time, for instance, is to see nature enlarged, growing beyond what it was before, and in its increase there is a new travail. Perhaps you will think me unduly fanciful, but you can almost hear the trees travailling at certain times as you walk in the woods. Probably if our ears were more attuned to that realm -- and there are sounds, real sounds, to which our ears are not attuned -- we should hear the groaning of the creation. Paul says this: "The whole creation groaneth and travaileth..." (Rom. 8:22). Why? It is pent up, it is held back, it is under arrest; it is groaning for its expansion, its enlargement, its liberation.

That is a law in spiritual things. Every fresh measure of Christ, every bit of spiritual increase, is fraught with a fresh baptism into His passion. We should recognise that, because so often we do not understand why it is that, when we ask for spiritual increase and enlargement, we immediately are plunged into a bad time. The increase comes that way, does it not? Some of us have learnt that so well that, if we say these things to the Lord, it is so to speak with our tongue in our cheek! We are very, very careful what we say to the Lord. We have learned that the way of enlargement is at cost, through fresh travail, and we cannot get away from it. Yes, there are successive baptisms into the passion of Christ. The law of His universality is the law of His passion. "I came to cast fire upon the earth... But I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened until it be accomplished!" (Luke 12:49,50). By the travail of His soul, the passion of His Cross, the straitening was removed, the fire was scattered, and the enlargement took place. But that is equally true of the church as of Himself. The church has never expanded and been released without some convulsion. That is a matter of history.

### (c) Consummation

Again, what is true of God's beginnings, and of God's continuations and enlargements, is true of His final consummation: that in the finality of things there will be one mighty convulsion. If you like to change the word -- travail. I am not sure that the church has not entered upon that already. It is certainly coming, and it will be, at the end, the explanation. It is true to the Word. That ultimate, final, intrinsic thing of glory and preciousness, God is going to bring out of the fiery ordeal at the end. Yes, the travail of the church at the end will issue in the final emergence of the church in glory and in the consummation of the divine purpose. The Bible sees a great travail in the church and in the creation, out of which the Kingdom in fullness will finally come. "When these things begin to come to pass... lift up your heads; because your redemption draweth nigh" (Luke 21:28). It means your escape, your release, your exodus, your WAY OUT.

## Travail has Universal Significance

Now this principle is, of course, comprehensively gathered up in Christ Himself and in His Cross. Christ's Cross -- His passion -- is central to the whole universe, and it is central in this particular respect: it is travail through which the universe is redeemed. Yes, the heavens and the earth. The Cross of the Lord Jesus affects the whole range of things in the earth and beyond the earth. His travail is of universal significance, of infinite reach. And in every experience of true spiritual travail there is something that is of far-reaching significance and account.

Here is this one little man, Paul, thought very little of, despised, by the world both in his own day and through centuries since. A certain writer -- a great man in his own eyes -- calls him "the insignificant little Jew", Paul of Tarsus. Well, that is the world's estimate of him. Here he is saying: "I fill up... that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church" (Col. 1:24). In other words: "I sip His cup, and, in so doing, I touch the whole Body of Christ." It is a tremendous statement, is it not? But was it true? Has history proved that it was true?

I would like to stop here with a parenthesis on the historical side of things. Fifty years ago, the whole realm of biblical scholarship, as it is called, "finished" Paul. They wrote him off; they decided that Paul's teaching was not Christ's, that it was in another realm altogether -- it was not Christian. That was Paul finished, they thought! But somehow or another, he has had a mighty resurrection. The remarkable thing is that the whole realm of biblical scholarship is now anew giving Paul his place, seeing the immense significance of the man. It is a quite fascinating thing to follow the course of biblical interpretation, and to be able to see today the tremendous come-back that is taking place. Why it is, of course, we know, and they are all going to be made to know that this man, because he shared the sufferings of Christ, has a universal significance for the whole Body.

While that is interesting -- and I could add so much more to it -- the point is this. Here is the principle: that, if you and I really do share in the spiritual travail of Christ, we are lifted out of anything that is local and small and placed right in the universal. It is a value secured for the Body of Christ beyond anything merely earthly and parochial. That is the principle of His travail, which is placed at the centre of the universe; and to share that does mean such enlargement, such release. You see, we come back to that again: release, enlargement, expansion, fullness, reproduction -- use what words you will. The law is always the law of travail.

## Travail Reveals "Heart" or "Hollow"

The Lord allows travail -- indeed, He not only allows it, but appoints it -- in order to find out whether really there is a heart-relationship to His things. A few months ago, I found a tree lying at the side of the road, not far from my house. The day before, it had been upright and growing, and looking like all the other trees. It had all the leaves of profession, all the proximity of association with other trees, and outwardly it could pass off as being the real thing. But a storm came, and now it was lying there; and when I looked at it I found that it had no heart: it was a completely hollow thing -- there was only a framework. That is a parable. That is what is happening, and what is going to happen, and what God will cause to happen everywhere. The travail will come -- the suffering, persecution, trials, whatever it may be; and, whatever may be its form, whether it be within or without, it is going to come in order to discover whether there is a heart there for God, or whether, after all, it is hollow, it is profession, it is simply association on the outside, and not real on the inside. God must expose what is not real, and God must test everything to prove it.

But what had happened to the other trees -- those that stood near the fallen one? Well, they survived the storm, and they are still standing. But is that all? Not a bit of it! The next storm that comes will probably find that it has got a little harder work to do than last time to move these. Those roots have felt the strain and they have reached down and taken a tighter hold. They have got a grip on things; they have realised that storms are realities, and that it is a matter of life and death as to whether they stand.

It is so easy, is it not, when things get difficult, to walk out, give up? How often we pray that the Lord will protect from difficulties and troubles! -- but the Lord never answers prayers like that. These things come to us personally, and they come to us in our little companies -- storms, shaking storms, things calculated to devastate and scatter, destroy and finish what is there -- and the Lord does not protect. But what is He doing? On the one side He is finding out whether there is a heart for Him, and whether there is reality in every member, or whether it is only outward show and hollow inside. On the other hand, He is seeking to bring out the expression of preciousness: that this thing is too precious to let go easily; it means far too much for us to abandon at the first onset of adversity and trial. That is the meaning of it, and it explains very much, does it not?

### The Two "Israels"

Now this comprehends God's whole conception of a spiritual Israel. Why have we taken that fragment -- "the Israel of God"? You know, Paul was almost invidious when he used that phrase. If you look at the letter to the Galatians, you will see that he is dealing with two Israels, and in that phrase he is saying that there is a true Israel and a false. I think Phillips, in his "Letters to Young Churches", has put in a word which, while it is not in the text, is what is generally believed to give the meaning of Paul. His rendering is: "To the TRUE Israel of God". That is exactly what Paul meant. There is another Israel, which Paul says is not the true one. But there are those who "walk by this rule", this measure, this standard. What standard is this? If you look at the letter you will see. "My little children, of whom I am again in travail till Christ be formed in you..." (4:19). "As many as walk by this measure... the true Israel of God." The measure of Christ is made complete by travail. The true Israel of God is the "seed" which is "of the travail of his soul".

We see, then, that, whether we like it or not, this is an established law. We can, of course, do many things in order to avoid or get rid of the travail, but God's law means that there is something of preciousness that comes out when it is suffered for, when you suffer for it. May we never get to the place where we try to make the Christian life cheap and easy -- a perpetual holiday. While there is the joy -- and it should be there; while there should be the deep worship, thanksgiving and praise to God: surely the truest reality even of the joy is that it comes from deep experience through suffering. It is not the superficial, flippant, frivolous kind of Christian who really knows the Lord most. No: "We rejoice", said Paul, "in our tribulations" (Rom. 5:3). There is something precious for the Lord bound up with suffering, and you and I have to face that.

A few months ago I received, as out from China, a message given by brother Watchman Nee just before he was put in prison about four years ago. The subject of that message was -- the necessity for the breaking of the vessel in order to reveal the preciousness of the treasure within. It is true. Now he is experiencing it. But: "He shall see his seed... He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied".

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