

SOUL TRAVAIL

an evident token
of true,
Spirit energized
religion

The conflict that is waged continually in the life of a believer can be a source of assurance and comfort; on the other hand, its absence can be a sorely perturbing thing to the professor of religion.

by Elijah Thomas Chacko



“He staggered not at the promise of
God through unbelief; but was
strong in faith, giving glory to God”.

(Romans 4:20)



WHEN reading Paul's commentary of Abraham's life in his epistle to the Romans, one may be somewhat startled to find the apostle describing Abraham as one who "staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God". Yet when one muses upon the sacred pages of Genesis to mark the profile of Abraham's life, one cannot but be deeply impressed with the vicissitudes and titanic struggles that characterized his sojourn of faith. Certainly there is no inconsistency between the infallible writings of Moses and the plenary inspired thoughts of the greatest of the evangelical writers. Hence, we may well ask, why the apparent contradiction? The answer is that the strongest of faith is in reality a picture of very intense and titanic conflicts fought secretly. Even those who are unwavering and composed outwardly invariably have to overcome violent and acute inward resistances.

Perhaps this is supremely and most vividly exemplified by our Lord's agony and anguish at the Garden of Gethsemane. There He who had poignantly said, "My

soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death" poured out His soul unto Him "who was able to save Him from death." We may scarcely fathom the awesome vehemence of the travail and motions within the heart of our Lord, who was then very much debilitated psychologically, mentally and physically. There at Gethsemane we are able to capture a glimpse of the raging billows that tossed about within the soul of our Lord as He braced Himself to accomplish His Father's will. It is seasons like these spent in prayer and travail that enabled our Lord to practise the precepts that He Himself had recommended to His disciples: "Men ought always to pray, and not to faint." (Luke 18:1).

Paul, like his own Master, resolved himself resolutely in combating the surging floods within his soul. On one occasion he confessed, "our flesh had no rest, but we were troubled on every side; without were fightings, within were fears." It might not be just mere conjecture to assume that Paul's countenance always projected freshness and composure. Howbeit such placidity was gained as a consequence of the constant triumph of the war that was waged relentlessly within his soul.

Perhaps this fact is never more underscored than in the short treatise concerning the principles that are at work within the heart in the seventh chapter of Romans. Therein Paul laments, "For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I." (Romans 7:15). For with one breath, Paul mourns, "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" But in the next breath, he exclaims, "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord." But what I would like to forcibly bring across at this juncture is that the condition described in this renown but often misinterpreted portion of Scriptures denotes the principles that are at war in the soul of a regenerated man. In fact, it was Paul's own excruciating experience after his glorious conversion.

Scriptures upon Scriptures attest to the testimony that men who gloriously triumphed in faith were firstly, men who were subject to like passions as we are and then, those who overcame overwhelming odds not without much inward contentions.

Now while we vigorously refute the erroneous Wesleyan doctrine of the life of perfect sinlessness after justification (consider a lyric of Charles Wesley's in the hymn 'O For A Thousand Tongues': 'He breaks the power of cancelled sin'), we do not, on the other hand, afford any provision for antinomianism, even the licence to indulge in sin on account of free grace (see Romans 6). I have little doubt that it is the Antinomians whom Jude was referring to when he said, "For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ." (Jude 4).

Yet the true Christian life is a titanic battle warfare waged in the soul between the good and the evil. When the life of God is implanted into the soul of a man, a raging conflict between the new nature and the old nature ensues until death. Paul says it in another place, "For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would." (Galatians 5:17). If this struggle is ever graphically portrayed, it will evoke anxious and riveted attention. This is why spiritual autobiographies have a special niche and unique value in Christian literature. They elicit the reality of the inward conflict, which is the portion and lot of every truly regenerated soul. John Bunyan's 'Grace Abounding To The Chief Of Sinners', Augustine's 'Confessions', John Newton's outlines of his own spiritual life in his letters and Thomas Scott's 'The Force Of Truth' (the experiences of a 'minister' who was not yet saved, let alone called to the ministry) are without doubt some of the most precious treasures in the legacy of

Christian works that we have inherited in the evangelical library. Another cherished and potent classic in Christian literature is the collation of David Brainerd's diary, wherein the relatively young minister to the American Indians records and reveals some of his inward soul strivings in the midst of his missionary endeavours. These evangelical writings by the eminent saints are portrayals of true and lively piety. For one thing they demonstrate how soul exercise is an evident characteristic of true evangelical religion. Indeed it is not wrong to say that soul exercise is a proof of a healthy spiritual condition.

It is a reflection of the contemporary state of Christendom that we barely hear or talk of such a thing as soul travail. In a way this scarcity can be attributed to the fact that very few people today associate Christianity with its experimental aspect. While we rightly designate Charismatic and Pentecostal experiences as demonic, it is thoroughly un-biblical to detach and segregate emotion and feelings from Christianity. Who would say things such as the absolution of guilt, the quickening of God, the entrance and residence of the blessed Holy Spirit are not entirely vital and animating? Consider, for instance, David's plaintive cries in the fifty-first psalm, verses 8 to 12:

*"Make me to hear joy and gladness;
that the bones which Thou hast broken may rejoice.
Hide Thy face from my sins;
and blot out all mine iniquities.
Create in me a clean heart, O God;
and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from Thy presence;
and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me.
Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation;
and uphold me with Thy free Spirit."*

Herein the psalmist is pleading to God to grant him not just mere forgiveness of sins but that the merciful dealings of God towards him may be translated in such a

way that he may know and sense them. The same remarkable spiritual sensitivity is expressed in another of David's penitential psalm, namely, Psalm 32. Consider, verses 3 to 5:

"When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long.

For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer. Selah.

I acknowledged my sin unto Thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid.

I said, I will confess my transgressions unto Jehovah; and Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin. Selah."

It needs to be emphasized that mere attachment to orthodox doctrines or intellectual acquiescence to Scriptural truths may not necessarily confirm that vital godliness exists in us. "For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power." It is the delusion of religious hypocrites to say that religion has nothing to do with experience. The contrary is true. Christianity is intensely personal. It is the breathing of the Holy Spirit within the soul of a man. The words of John Newton serve to confirm this point, 'We may grow wise apace in opinions, by books and men, but vital experimental religion can only be received from the Holy Spirit.'

Wherefore let every professor of Christianity examine himself to prove whether he be in the faith. If soul exercise is not part of his familiar experience then let him depart from his iniquities and flee to Christ until he be found of Him. But if we are in the faith, then like Abraham of old, we too need to overcome patiently the incessant surge of forces within our soul until our ultimate triumph in faith. It is overcomers who will finally inherit eternal life! (Revelation 2:7,11,17,26-28; 3:5,12-21). □



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