

THE PRINCIPLE OF TRAVAIL

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 travailing 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 fulness 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, fulness, 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 hap-pen 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”.

A SPIRITUAL SEED

"When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed ... he shall see of the travail of his soul" (Isaiah 53:10,11).

"They are not all Israel, which are of Israel: neither, because they are Abraham's seed, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called. That is, it is not the children of the flesh that are children of God; but the children of the promise are reckoned for a seed" (Romans 9:6-8).

"Now to Abraham were the promises spoken, and to his seed. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ" (Galatians 3:16).

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

For our present consideration many other fragments of the same kind could be added, but these are sufficient, surely, to impress us. Of course, they will not impress *us* in the same way as they did those to whom they were first written. We are not able, without some very real illumination by the Holy Spirit, to recognise and appreciate the tremendous implications, the profound meaning of these statements of Paul. No, we have not yet fathomed all that Paul had come to see of what Christ meant, of what came in with Christ, of what happened when Christ came in, of what turned upon the advent of Christ. May the Spirit of God register something of those tremendous implications, even now.

It was this revelation which came to Paul, and his apprehension of the significance of Christ, that was the cause of all the trouble. If ever there was a man who got into trouble; around whom trouble circled and seethed, wherever he went — who seemed to make trouble, it was this man Paul. But when you ask what the cause of it all is, it is just this with which we are now occupied. It is a matter which in principle will always set up a furore; and as to its significance it comes from the realm of greater intelligence than the human.

Now Paul did, of course, recognise that there was such a thing as a nation of Jews, a Jewish nation. That sounds far too trite and obvious. With a wave of the hand, and mark you, a significant wave of the hand, a kind of objective wave, he said, "Behold Israel after the flesh". Whilst that is something to take account of, it is, nevertheless, objective — "Behold Israel, after the flesh". He recognised that that nation stood in a special relationship to

the sovereign ways of God in history. Indeed, he was proud and very glad that he had been born in that nation. He had a deep heart-love for his nation, and he longed, as he said, that they might be saved: “Brethren, my heart’s desire and my prayer to God is for them, that they might be saved” (Rom. 10:1). Notice how objective is his attitude; he is not saying: “that we might be saved”. Note that, because it is a feature of this whole matter.

But, with all, with all his recognition, all his pleasure, and his longing and praying in that direction, he had come to see that they were not by nature “the Israel of God”. That is the root of all the trouble. I underline the words *by nature*; they were not by nature *the* Israel of God, which, of course, they claimed to be. It is true that Israel was something, but the *true* Israel, the true Israel to which he referred in that fragment “the Israel of God” or the true “Israel of God” — was not a natural thing at all, and it is not. It is spiritual. It is not a Jewish, historic, earthly thing; it is not Abraham’s *natural* generation. This is what Paul is saying, and it is only what his Master, the Lord Jesus, had said. This Israel is Christ’s generation; this “seed” is Christ, and those who are Christ’s, begotten, born out of His travail. Christ’s seed is essentially spiritual. No one was ever born of Him naturally. And yet, through those many centuries, the world has become occupied by His seed, which He is seeing, as of the travail of His soul. This seed is not begotten of Abraham, but begotten of God; it is not descended from Abraham through Jacob, the man with every feature of that which is natural (“supplanter” his name means, that is, “one who takes hold”, whose nature it is to be possessive — a very clear mark of the natural man) not through ambitious, scheming, cunning, clever, opportunist, unscrupulous and self-strong Jacob. This seed does not come through Jacob, but through Israel. What a great deal that means spiritually; that, having encountered God, and being virtually dead, through the grace of God he has survived. He said “I have seen God face to face, and my life is spared” — the most wonderful thing has happened; I have seen God face to face, and my *life* is spared! To come into an encounter with God, as did Jacob, means death: yes, and virtually that is what it was: and typically, Israel must be born, or there is no future — there is no future at all — Isra-*e*! Surely this all leads us to the true “seed of Christ”, the true “Israel of God”.

The significance of Abraham

We begin therefore with the true significance of Abraham. Abraham represents a terminal point in the history of the Old Testament, and then, from him, an unbroken course of national existence proceeded up to Christ. Through Abraham a race was re-born and marked out in special relationship to God’s eternal desire. There is much that is technical, interesting and instructive in that study, but we leave it. You know that the first name, designation, of that nation or race, was “Hebrew” which means “that which has come from beyond”; “the man from over there, beyond the river”, meaning, beyond the Euphrates, simply, “the man from beyond”. The Hebrew race then, is that which has migrated over,

come from beyond. Later, they became known as the “Jews”; that is quite a limited title, and just means the “descendants of Judah”. In the beginning it just had that limited meaning of “descendants from Judah”, in their country of Judea, but it became more general. Later still they became known as Israel — the descendants of Jacob *after* his crisis at Peniel.

Knowing all this, Paul nevertheless says that this was not the true Israel. He, like all the others, at one time believed that it was; but he had come to see that it was not the *true* Israel, that the true Israel is *inward*, and not natural or outward. And that opens up a large field of very important consideration, which we will deal with later.

Israel — a great object lesson

As the tabernacle in the wilderness, and later the temple in the land, with all its components, was the embodiment of spiritual and heavenly principles and realities; as the priesthood, the sacrifices, the feasts were likewise the embodiment of spiritual realities, and not the realities them-selves — so it was with Israel. These are the things which make up the nation, they make up the life of the nation; they *are* Israel. The point is this — it was possible, and is possible, to separate between the things themselves and those spiritual thoughts and principles. So that it is possible to have a tabernacle, replete with priesthood, sacrifices, and feasts, and yet not have the spiritual reality. It is possible to separate these things, because they are not one. Even God has no place for those symbols when they have lost their spiritual power and meaning. He will vehemently reject the *things* — ark, tabernacle, and everything else — without compunction.

Paul carries this right through to Israel. He says: “Israel after the flesh” is one thing, “Israel after the Spirit” is *another*; these things can be divided, and God has set aside “Israel after the flesh”. Put it another way — what God is after, what He is concerned with, what He is going on with, is that which was represented by them, the reality.

The cry of all the prophets is that this divide has taken place. Israel is going on with the temple, going on with the services, going on with the sacrifices, but it is all hollow. There is a tremendous difference between the seed of Abraham after the flesh and the seed of Christ. What is the seed of Christ? It is something essentially, intensely, spiritually *real*! It is not something that bears a name; it is not something which holds certain doctrines and truths — the Law, or what corresponds to that in Christianity. It is not something that performs certain rites, and goes through certain ceremonies. It is not something along that external line at all — be it intellectual, emotional, volitional, or physical — it is something inwardly real. It is “Christ *in* you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27). This is what God is after. And if Israel was raised up for a purpose, it was to set forth these realities in a pictorial, symbolic way. God’s object is not a Jewish nation as such, but a heavenly people, constituted on spiritual realities. Israel is for all time a

great object lesson which God has set in the midst of the nations to indicate spiritual principles. They will remain that object lesson to the end. God, in preserving, keeping that nation, does so, not because of that nation itself, but to maintain an object lesson in the midst of the nations, especially to Christianity.

Unmistakable features

Let us look at Israel after the flesh. There are some features which cannot be mistaken! Many years ago, I knew an outstanding and well-known Christian Jew, who had travelled all over the world. He said to me on one occasion: "It does not matter what nation I go into, and how much they have become apparently absorbed in the nation where they are living, I can always tell a Jew; he may have fair hair or dark hair; there may be differences arising from their living in different countries for generations, but there is something that I can always recognise, and I never make a mistake." What does God say about that? He says to us, as being of the seed of Christ, that this true Israel should be at least as pronounced in its features, in its distinctiveness, as they are! There should be no mistaking a child of God. Everybody should know when they have met a child of God. By means of that, God says to us that this seed, which is the true Israel of God, born of the travail of Christ, is to bear the unmistakable character of Christ. All who meet that seed know they have met, not father Abraham, but another Father — they have met God in Christ.

This is very searching; but it is the true exegesis, the true interpretation of this word — "his seed", "he shall see his seed": every one betraying His features, bearing His characteristics, being recognised; not because they bear a name — whether that be Israel or Christian; not because they observe the law and the customs; not because they hold the oracles and the truths; not because they do or do not certain things — but because they bear the likeness of Him of whom they are born. That is what God says — unmistakable features! "By this shall *all* men know ... if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35).

The law of separation

Another thing about "Israel after the flesh", which goes very much along with that, is that law which God laid down for them, so firmly and so severely, and upon the observance or violation of which their very national existence hung — the law of separation. Abraham is in Ur of the Chaldees, in Babylon, with all the Baalite worship, the two thousand deities, on the other side, over there. God calls him "Abraham the Hebrew"; he has come across, passed over, come out, been severed from his country, and then brought into another land which God is going to purge of every other seed. That is His intention, to purge that land of every other seed, and to populate it and fill it only with this seed; and then to lay down, in the strictest possible way, the law forbidding intermarriage with any other people or nation on pain of unqualified rejection. There were, of course,

deep reasons for that. There was the spiritual reason of “other gods”, and the opening of the door to that other spiritual realm. That is what is meant by “iniquity” in the Old Testament, what the prophets spoke of as “fornication” — the marring of “the virgin daughter of Zion”. But here it is: no intermarriage whereby there will be loss of distinctiveness of life and character. It is the severest law of God. Because of the violation of that law God had all His long-drawn-out controversy with Israel through the prophets, and, at last, sent the nation where they chose to be — into another land — and let them feel something of what that means. The bringing back of that remnant is so full of significance, when you recognise that it is reconstitution on this very principle.

Indeed God has written this large — and “the things that were written aforetime were written for our learning”. He is saying by Israel: On the positive and on the negative side My seed is different; My seed is distinct; My seed must have no intermarriage, it must not lose its distinctiveness, it must be a separate thing. The seed of Christ is like that — spiritually separate. It seems that right from the beginning, in the case of Adam and Eve, and from then onward, the one determined intention of Satan has been to destroy that distinctiveness of what is of God. All Israel’s history is just that; and he did not stay there, he pressed it through to the very case of Jesus Himself. That is the focal point of the temptations of Jesus, in some way to insinuate something that would destroy His separateness from everything that was not of God. Satan’s efforts to destroy distinctiveness, so successful in the case of Israel, so unsuccessful when concentrated upon Jesus Himself, have been continued throughout the history of the church. God’s spiritual law is written so deeply here for us. This seed is something not of the flesh, not of this world; something different, something quite other; a divine seed that does not belong here, has not originated here, has not its roots here. “If then ye were raised together with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is ... for ye *died*” (Col. 3:1,3). Now Paul saw quite well that Israel after the flesh had become something very other than that, very mixed up and compromised here in this world.

The cohesion of Israel

Another thing about Israel which is quite apparent even now, and has been all the way through history, is their cohesion. There is no doubt about it. If you deal with these people, you meet “clannishness” (if you like to call it that), something very loyal to itself — *very* loyal to itself. They are a people bound together in blood and in consciousness and in jealousy, about whom there is a unity, a cohesion and an integration which is unique. Though scattered over the earth, and seemingly broken up, they are one people. What a lesson! What an object lesson!

Turning to the New Testament we find that this seed, having one origin, one source, one life-principle, is one. That is the meaning of John 17, is it not? The secret of oneness, of unity, is not in doctrine, in practice, in tradition or in names

— God only knows how true that is! It is something deeper than that — it is in *birth*, and what that means, inheritance in the blood. How pathetically tragic that there is not this jealousy, this loyalty, among those who claim to be of this seed! What a breakdown! We ought to be very jealous for every child of God; we ought to be loyal to one another, because we are of the same family. There ought to be something here that is stronger than all the outside forces. That has proved true in “Israel after the flesh”, for the most violent action of outside forces has only brought out their inward cohesion. Their unity is manifested and even strengthened by opposition and antagonism and persecution — what a lesson!

Discrimination as to food

Then there is this whole question of food — a very acute question with Israel after the flesh. The Law required them to be very particular, very careful, very discriminating — but all that is written only as an object lesson. It says something of which the children of God, the true Israel of God, must take note. Have we a spiritual faculty which corresponds to their natural one in selectiveness of food? *Discerning* — this is exactly what John was talking about in his letter, when he said: “The anointing which ye received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any one teach you” (1 John 2:27) — “you know ... you know ...” — this is a spiritual instinct or faculty of knowing what is of Christ and what is not of Christ. How important it is to keep the seed pure through spiritual discernment!

Israel's governing hope

There is one further undying feature with “Israel after the flesh”. It has persisted all down the ages, and is as strong today as ever it was — their hope! Why is it that those who are able still go to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem? These people are characterized by this deep-set, deep-rooted hope! Hope! Something; sometime; someone; one day — they live for that; it is that which has carried them through, supported them, sustained them, kept them — their hope! If ever that should fade in Israel, they will disintegrate indeed, and they will fall a prey to their enemies. It is this that holds together, and this that gives the power to stand up and go on. With us, it is a spiritual thing, something that is part of our birth. The true spiritual seed of Christ is dominated, mastered, by what the apostle calls, “the blessed hope”, “the day of the Lord”, “the promise of his coming” — a master-hope. Is it not true to spiritual experience, that when we are really born again, a sense of prospect, of a future, is born in our hearts, and it remains a strong thing throughout. This is not something taken on as teaching, not even the teaching of the “Second Coming”, the coming again of the Lord, but there is something beyond the teaching, the Spirit Himself has given birth to a hope within us. We are living for a Day, and that Day is our strength; it holds us on our way. How true that is, and how rich it is in the suffering people of God in all

times, and in our own.

The turning point of the dispensations

In the light of what we have been saying hitherto, I want to turn you to the Gospel by John, and in particular to the third chapter.

In spite of many years of familiarity with and much reading of that chapter, I feel there is still much in it that I have not yet grasped. All that we have said, and more; all that is indicated and signified in the whole of the Old Testament and of the New Testament is implicit in this third chapter of John's Gospel. It is a chapter upon the meaning of which two mighty dispensations turn. The tremendous change which has been indicated, which Paul came to see by revelation — this tremendous change from "Israel after the flesh" to "Israel after the Spirit" — centres in that chapter.

This Gospel by John has been more of a bone of contention, controversy and conflict, than any of the other Gospels. The popular trend amongst Bible "scholars" now is to rank Mark's gospel first and highest. Mark is the key to everything; Mark is the sum of everything; they are making a tremendous amount of Mark! We are not saying they are wrong. After all, there is not much difficulty about Mark, is there? Matthew and Luke — well, they do not present much trouble, they provoke very little dispute or conflict — but John! Some of them have written him off altogether, ruled him right out, they will not have him. Is that not significant? When you are dealing with the Gospels of Mark and Matthew and Luke, you are dealing mainly with the historic Jesus, the earthly Christ, what they call the Jesus of history. When you come to John's Gospel, you come into the absolutely spiritual realm — it is the heavenly Christ that is here — not born of Adam or Abraham, but — from eternity. Look at the word "heavenly" on his lips in this Gospel. Everything here is in the spiritual realm. John, as you know, calls all the miracles "signs" — things that have another meaning, that signify something else, and we cannot see the other, the something else, unless God opens our eyes; it is spiritual and is set in the spiritual realm. That is what Satan hates, that is the cause of all the trouble. Men who only operate in the realm of human intellect and reason, even in their approach to the Scriptures, cannot come into this realm at all without a sense of uneasiness, for it exposes unspirituality. When we come into the realm of the spiritual seed — or to put that another way — when we come into the realm where God is after, not an earthly, a traditional, an historical, but a spiritual people, we come into the realm of the intensest conflict and controversy. Notice how this very Gospel proceeds in an atmosphere of antagonism — it is like that. There comes a time when, because of that, Jesus has to withdraw with His disciples in order to have them alone, to prepare them for a day that is coming. This controversy, this conflict, is constantly surrounding them.

The securing of “true Israel” — the realm of intensest conflict

Now that is very significant in the larger application. The securing of a spiritual, a heavenly, a divine seed, in Satan’s domain, is fraught with the bitterest conflict, an opposition, the intensity of which can only be explained on this ground. The more the children of God are found going on with Christ in a spiritual way towards God’s full end, the more diverse and inexplicable conflict will they meet, and that from every realm. It just happens! If we really get off the traditional, historical basis of life, even in Christianity, on to those higher levels of what is spiritual or what is of Christ, essentially and utterly of Christ, we shall come into the realm of the bitterest conflict.

That is why this all leads back to the matter of travail which was before us in the previous chapter. We find in the New Testament that the travail was not all over when the child was born. It was not all over typically and symbolically when Israel was secured out of Egypt — it went on. When Moses came back and met Hobab, his father-in-law, it says they greeted one another, and asked of one another’s health, and that “Moses told his father-in-law all that the Lord had done ... for Israel’s sake, all

the travail ... by the way” (Ex. 18:8). After Egypt! So the birth is not the end. Paul says: “I am again in travail until Christ be [fully] formed in you” (Gal. 4:19). The church was born out of the travail of Christ, but what a travail she has been in again and again, and will be to the end. It all comes back there — the securing and perfecting of this spiritual seed is fraught with conflict. Whether we see the implications of what is signified by that statement or not, we need to think about it — it will explain a great deal. There is the difference of two worlds between spiritual Christianity and traditional Christianity, just as much as there is between “Israel after the flesh” and “Israel after the Spirit” — a tremendous difference. It is going to be seen eventually that the obtaining of the perfected seed of Christ was a very, very costly thing.

May the Lord just write something of this on our hearts, and show us very, very clearly what it is He is really after, that His heart is set upon a people for Himself — a people according to Christ, a heavenly people, a spiritual people, whose life is not comprised of outward things at all, but whose life is the corporate expression of God’s Son; those who bear His unmistakable features. Oh that it might be possible for people to say: There is no mistaking that one — no mistaking what he is, what she is — he is a “Jew”, she is a “Jew”, in the spiritual Israel — he, she, is a member of Christ!

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