Intercession: Groaning and Travail

For ye are come unto mount Sion and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn which are written in heaven and to God, the Judge of all and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaketh better things that that of Abel. [Heb 12:22-24]

For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar—for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children—but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all. [Gal 4:22-26 NKJV]

Paul clearly equated Mount Sinai with the giving of the law and Mount Zion (Sion) with the arrival of the Gospel of Grace which birthed the church. Isaiah foresaw this when speaking his prophecy as recorded in Chapter 66 and it amazed him because such a thing had never even been conceived of before:

Who hath heard such a thing? Who hath seen such things? Shall the earth be made to bring forth in one day, or shall a nation be born at once, for as soon as Zion travailed (went into labour - NKJV), she brought forth her children. [Isa 66:8]

Zion, the church, brings her children into the earth. Certainly, it is done by preaching and teaching the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but the preaching and teaching are preceded by prayer and intercession that pave the way and bring the anointing. Every great man and woman of God throughout the ages, has been a man or woman of prayer. The strength of the anointing and the depth of revelation in the Word are given through prayer and intercession, with travail.

Travailing in prayer

An aspect of intercession that is not only misunderstood but also abused by well-meaning but often over-zealous and uninformed believers is travail. It is often treated as though synonymous with groaning, but the two phenomena are in fact separate and different from one another.

In broad brush-strokes, travail births and groaning delivers. Both are brought on only by the anointing of the Holy Spirit when and as, and for as long as He wills – not as the believer thinks it is appropriate, nor to demonstrate how “anointed” or “sensitive to the Holy Spirit” he is. They are both a normal and natural part of intercession and nothing “freaky” or super-spiritual or weird.

However, this aspect of intercession is for the prayer closet only – not for public ministry. When it takes place in group intercession, it is for intercessors who have been called together and anointed by the Lord when they are in intercession together “behind doors” as it were. It is not intended to be conducted in general open gatherings where there are believers of all different levels of faith and maturity who could be offended, upset or confused, any more than it would be fitting for a child to be taken into a room where a woman is giving physical birth. That could be a traumatic experience.

But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him. And if they were all one member, where were the body? But now are they many members, yet but one body. And
the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of thee. Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary: And those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness. For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked: That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. [1Co 12:18-25]

There are parts of our body that appear less important than the visible ones that to the naked eye seem to be doing and functioning and producing results. We don’t readily see them, but without them, the body would be disabled. In the same way, there are parts that are “uncomely”, so we cover them up.

Intercessors definitely are often seen as strange and unimportant to the uninformed as well as to those with anointings that minister more directly and immediately to the body, because it is often very difficult to equate what they do with what happens in the body – today, tomorrow or in three years’ time.

They are uncomely parts of the body and they must be “covered up”. In other words, their ministry is to be done “in secret” [Mat 6:6, 18] not in public view. The moment intercessors start seeking man’s recognition and desiring praise and applause and pats on the back, they are opening doors to deception, hurt and damage.

What is travail?
The most often used description of travail is that it is “giving birth, or birthing, in the spirit.” It is crucially, vitally important to know and realise that it is a spiritual work. It does not originate by the flesh. It cannot be worked up by human effort or desire. It is a working of the Holy Spirit through and in a believer and as such does have a definite effect upon the body and emotions, but can never ever be initiated physically or emotionally.

Any true intercessor will immediately discern when someone is trying to “work up” groaning or travelling. It can be distasteful and off-putting. It leaves one feeling uncomfortable. Because it is, in Scriptural terms, unclean. It is unholy and opens the door to evil spirits such as religious spirits, spirits of lies and deception, among others, all of which bring bondage and division to the intercessors and to the wider body. It also exposes those being prayed for to spiritual attack. It must be stopped immediately if it manifests in a group situation.

While firm, any correction must be undertaken with the clean love of Christ. Everyone makes mistakes while growing, and correction properly done will edify everyone present. This is also one of the reasons why there must always be a recognised spiritual authority present with the intercessors: preferably a male elder who has intercessory experience or a seasoned intercessor whose authority is recognised and accepted. Any group intercession should be conducted with the approval of the lead elders. (See Guidelines for Group Intercession)

I repeat: intercessors must always guard against manufacturing travail in the flesh, attempting to recreate their experience of the wonder of this form of intercession. Those who attempt to emulate and relive it in their flesh expose themselves to extreme spiritual danger. They think that if they moan and groan (loudly) they actually are travelling. They are not.

Travail arises up from deep within the spirit. It will vary in intensity as the Spirit wills. It will vary in duration as the Spirit wills. It will most definitely impact both body and emotions but must never be subject to them. The anointing will sometimes lift with great suddenness. Sometimes it will tail off quietly. Sometimes it can end in great rejoicing or laughter, sometimes in weeping. When the anointing lifts, STOP!

Do not try to retain the emotional or physical response in travail by continuing to pray. Do not try to keep interceding because you think the prayer session was too short, or not intense enough or whatever. Listen to the Holy Spirit. Be sensitive to Him. Obey Him.
The Holy Spirit will not bring on travail that He cannot bring to completion through you, so do not stop, until you know the work is done. Shall I bring to the birth and not cause to bring forth, saith the Lord: Shall I cause to bring forth and shut the womb, saith thy God. [Isa 66:9]

Travail is sometimes extremely exhausting and draining and because of it, many intercessors stop before it is complete. This will cause an even greater sense of draining and exhaustion in the intercessor that generally will require ministry. It can lead to depression and confusion. The Holy Spirit will strengthen you to press on until the work is done.

**What does travail do?**

Travailing births people, events, prophecies, God's purposes and plans in the spirit. It is commonly accepted by most Bible scholars that prophecies given by God must be spoken and prayed into being. This is what travail does.

The most striking examples of these are of course recorded in the life of Daniel, Elijah and of Christ. Daniel had seen in the book of Jeremiah that the Babylonian captivity would last seventy years and set himself to pray with fasting and supplications (which as we will see is an Old Testament picture of intercession with travail) that the Lord fulfill this prophecy and return the people to Jerusalem. [Dan 8:10] His prayers not only enabled that prophecy to be fulfilled, but set the stage for events not only far into the future of the “ancient world” but to the end of our own days.

God had told Elijah to show himself to Ahab and He would end the drought which Elijah had proclaimed upon the land for the nation's idolatry. After the showdown with the prophets of Baal which culminated in their death, Elijah went up to the top of Mount Carmel, “cast himself down upon the earth and put his face between his knees,” [1 Ki 18:42] – a picture of intense intercession. He then proceeded to pray in God's Word about rain. In speaking about this prayer, James says: “The earnest (heartfelt, continued) prayer of a righteous man makes tremendous power available [dynamic in its working]. [James 5:16 AMP]

Countless prophecies had been spoken as recorded in the Old Testament about the Messiah to come, and it is striking that at His birth, two people are very specifically mentioned. [Luke 2] Simeon was just an ordinary man, but called “just and devout” who had been looking for the birth of the Messiah. This immediately indicates that he had been praying for the coming of the Messiah. Luke writes “At that time there was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was righteous and devout and was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him and had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. That day the Spirit led him to the Temple. So when Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus to the Lord as the Law required, Simeon was there. He took the child in his arms and praised God, saying, ‘Sovereign Lord, now let Your servant die in peace, as You have promised. I have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared for all people. He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and He is the glory of Your people Israel!’” [Luk 2:25-32 NLT]

Why would the Holy Spirit reveal that to him if it hadn’t been his burning desire and the topic of his prayers? He would see the fulfillment of the prophecy that he had been praying for. When he was led into the temple where Jesus was being presented, he immediately knew who it was – how? Because he had been praying for this child’s birth and the Holy Spirit revealed the fulfillment of that prayer to him.

Anna was the second person recorded in Luke, a prophetess who had been widowed after seven years and since then (over 60 years!) had been serving in the temple night and day with fastings and prayings. The topic of her prayers also becomes instantly apparent because she immediately recognised the Messiah “And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. [Luk 2:38 ESV]

There is little doubt that this man and woman of God had done what Daniel and Elijah had done in praying in God’s Word – they had taken the prophecies about the Messiah before God and prayed for God’s will to be fulfilled in sending Jesus Christ.

While Paul speaks of the intensity of this kind of intercession in his letter to the Galatians, he was not the only disciple who prayed in this way. Paul himself mentions Epaphroditus or Epaphras (scholars thinks Epaphras is a contraction of Epaphroditus and therefore the same person) in his letters.
to the Philippians and Colossians, using the word “labour”: I supposed it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and companion in labour and fellowsoldier. [Php 2:25]

Both travail and warfare are thus associated by his use of the words “companion in labour and fellowsoldier”, since obviously neither Paul nor Epaphroditus were actual soldiers.

The concept is made even clearer when Paul writes: Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, salute you, always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. [Col 4:12] This prayer also reflects Paul’s own cry to the Galatians about travailing till Christ be formed in them.

Many dimensions of travail

Writing to the Galatians, Paul cries out “Oh my little children, of whom I travail (labour) in birth again until Christ be formed in you!” [Gal 4:19]

These prayers of Paul and Epaphras show that travail is not just to “birth” a person or event or circumstance into the world, but that the Holy Spirit also uses travail to nurture a process. Paul clearly travailed the first time in actually enabling the Galatians to receive Jesus Christ and be born again – that is why he says “I travail in birth again.”

The word he uses for travail is odino which according to Strong is to experience the pains of parturition (literally or figuratively): travail in (birth). Now he is once again experiencing the travail of intercession as he prays for them to grow up into Christ. In the light of the absence of intercession in most churches, is it surprising that the believers who sit week after week in the pews remain babes in the Word and in spiritual maturity?

Jesus Himself travailed, although the description does not use the word odino but rather a number of other words which describe some of the many different experiences of intercessory travail.

He was “sorrowful and very heavy” [Mat 26:37] words meaning in extreme distress and anguish. “My soul is exceeding sorrowful even unto death” [vs 38] speaking of the intensity of the spiritual agony and anguish. “He began to be sore amazed and very heavy” [Mark 14:33] utterly affrighted and in great distress (Strong) And being in an agony, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground. [Luk 22:44] the words denote great struggle and anguish. It is a known medical fact that immense stress can cause the capillaries in the face to rupture, causing blood to come out like sweat.

Jesus was praying His death on the cross: His bearing our punishment and rejection by God and His death. It is no wonder His disciples fell asleep “for sorrow”, because the burden and intensity of that travail must have been so great that the heaviness and agony of it simply washed them into oblivion. When intense travail and groaning take place in an intercessory group, it can have an effect on those not actually being used in this way: they “sense” the spiritual burden and while not themselves travailing will be helping through their own intercession.

However, notice in the accounts in all three gospels that when He rose up from having prayed the third time, He was completely calm, completely in control of Himself and His emotions and completely at peace. The work had been accomplished.  

Isaiah describes it in chapter 52 vs 11: “He shall see of the travail of his soul and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.” His travail led to our salvation and redemption. In praying the death and resurrection, Jesus birthed the church.

The writer to the Hebrews said of Christ, obviously referring to the agony in the garden: “who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, called by God as High Priest “according to the order of Melchizedek...” [Heb 5:7-10 NKJV] This is a very clear picture of what frequently occurs in intercessory travail.
In more modern times, the stories of the intercessory prayer made by Father Nash and by “Praying Hyde” of India describe similar agonies of travail. J.Paul Reno wrote a treatise called “Daniel Nash – prevailing prince of prayer” in which he reported some of the little-known life of Father Nash. He speaks of his “great strivings in prayer”. Father Nash would arrive in towns two to three weeks ahead of the arrival of the great preacher and evangelist – the “father of revivalism”, Charles G Finney. He, with one or two others, would separate themselves in a room somewhere and pray night and day for the outpouring of the Spirit and for the conversion of souls during Finney’s campaigns.

“The great evangelist, Charles Finney, left his itinerant ministry for the pastorate within three or four months after this man’s death. Finney never counted on his theology, messages, preaching style, logic, or methods to save souls. He looked rather to mighty prayer and the resulting powerful work of the Holy Spirit to sweep in with great conviction on his audience, that his conversions might be thorough. This may well explain why 80 percent of those converted in his meetings stood the test of time.”

While Finney preached, Father Nash “would be upon his face in an agony of prayer.” “Such praying required mental effort to aim at the proper effect with true soul struggle. To move from real burden to solid faith often requires the path of soul agony. We are too committed to cop out with fatalism, unconcern, or shifting the responsibility to the lost. It may require a wrestling in prayer until we obtain the desired blessing. This is on a far higher plane than the physical. These struggles of soul and spirit may produce more than weariness in the physical realm. But the body agony is but a result of such prayer, and not an integral part. Some would counterfeit this soul struggle by physical manifestations. They may fool man but such hypocrisy is of no help in the courts of Heaven.”

Finney himself wrote: “I have never known a person sweat blood; but I have known a person to pray till the blood started from his nose. And I have known persons pray till they were all wet with perspiration, in the coldest weather in winter. I have known persons pray for hours, till their strength was all exhausted with the agony of their minds. Such prayers prevailed with God.”

“Give me souls oh God or I die!” This was the well-known cry of “Praying Hyde”, a missionary in India whose intercession led to the revivals in that country in the early 20th Century. “If on any day four people were not converted, Hyde said at night there would be such a weight on his heart he could not eat or sleep until he had prayed through to victory.” It is reported that such was the intensity of his intercession over many years that his heart shifted out of its natural position on the left side of his chest to a place over on the right.

**Wailing, mourning, weeping**

During travail, the intercessor is often led to stand in the gap for the person/s being prayed for and this can result in many different dimensions of prayer. We find countless types and shadows of this type of intercession in the Old Testament, where bitter weeping, wailing and lamenting are associated with repentance, with the grief of loss, sorrow at impending judgement, intense despair.

Jeremiah – the so-called “weeping prophet” - is an important proponent of the theme which foreshadows intercessory travail and weeping, repenting on behalf of others and weeping for their sins so that God can move in their lives.

“Thus says the LORD of hosts: “Consider and call for the mourning women, That they may come; And send for skillful wailing women, That they may come. Let them make haste And take up a wailing for us, That our eyes may run with tears, And our eyelids gush with water. For a voice of wailing is heard from Zion: ‘How we are plundered! We are greatly ashamed, Because we have forsaken the land, Because we have been cast out of our dwellings.’ “ Yet hear the word of the LORD, O women, And let your ear receive the word of His mouth; Teach your daughters wailing, And everyone her neighbor a lamentation.” [Jer 9:17-20 NKJV]

God was warning His people through Jeremiah of great judgement to come if they failed to amend their ways, calling on them to repent and turn to him and telling them repeatedly that He was a God who loved mercy, righteousness and justice, [Isa 24] but that if they didn't repent and turn from their evil, judgement would follow.
He is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. He needs intercessors who are prepared to stand before Him on behalf of others, to travail in mourning and weeping so that He can move to forgive and to save and to bring into the earth His will and purposes.

Joel cries out “Now, therefore,” says the LORD, “Turn to Me with all your heart, With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.” [Joel 2:12 NKJV] This is an Old Testament picture of travail and intercession.

“Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people” Joel cried in an agony of intercession [9:1] He warned those who had heard God's warnings: “But if ye will not hear it, my soul shall weep in secret places for your pride, and mine eye shall weep sore, and run down with tears, because the Lord's flock is carried away captive.” [13:17]

And one of his strongest admonitions which the church today so desperately needs to take to heart: “But if they are prophets, and if the word of the LORD is with them, let them now make intercession to the LORD of hosts, that the vessels which are left in the house of the LORD, in the house of the king of Judah, and at Jerusalem, do not go to Babylon.” [Jer 27:18 NKJV]

Who are those who today have the word of the Lord? It is every believer. Who are the vessels left in the house of the LORD? – those that have not yet gone into captivity – the servants of God who have not yet been seduced by the compromising doctrines and programmes so prevalent in the church today, those who have not fallen into deception, those still true to the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are required of God to pray for those in authority and for one another so that we are kept from deceit.

Joel repeats the call: “Let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep between the porch and the altar, and let them say, ‘Spare thy people O LORD’”. [Joel 2:17]

Intercession with travail, weeping and mourning, is an essential requirement if new believers are to be brought into the church of Jesus Christ and if the church is to grow into maturity.

Travailing births prophecies that have been spoken: over individuals, churches or nations. One of the reasons that promises that God has given to churches and to individuals are not coming to pass is because the church and those believers have not taken the responsibility of praying those prophecies into being through travail.

When travail is completed, great peace or rejoicing generally follows, as so beautifully described by Isaiah: “To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness, that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified.” [Is 61:3]

Supplications
The words most commonly used in the Old Testament for “supplication/s” are chinnah and tachanun (derived from chinnah - Strong). Strong defines chinnah as an entreaty for grace, and the Word Study elaborates it as a “request for favour” that is “always directed towards God.”

Of tachanun the Word Study says “Daniel used the word to indicate how he turned to the Lord in a prayer of petition, i.e., he pleaded with Him in prayers of petition with fasting and in sackcloth and ashes. He also called to God to hear the prayers and petitions of His servant. The noun was also used by the psalmist, who made a plea to God to hear his cry for mercy. In Jeremiah, a cry was heard on the barren heights, along with weeping and pleading by the people of Israel. The word was also used to inform Daniel that as soon as he began his prayer or petition, an answer would be given to him.”

The other word for “supplication/s”, hanan, Strong defines as to bend or stoop in kindness towards an inferior, to implore, and the Word Study explains: “Outside of the wisdom literature, the agent of graciousness is most frequently God.”

In the New Testament, the word deesis is used and is often translated simply as “prayer” rather than supplication, but its meaning as “supplication” is brought out more clearly in Paul’s writing to Timothy: “I exhort therefore, that first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks
be made for all men.” [1 Ti 2:1] This is an instruction to pray on behalf of others, which is the essence of intercession. Paul then elaborates who the “all men” are: for kings and for all that are in authority, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.” [vs 2]

The purpose of intercession is to enable God to work His purposes in the earth, to prevent evil forces from operating and to establish peace. The very fact that the world is in the mess it is in is because the church is failing in its intercessory mandate.

**Groanings**

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In the Old Testament groaning is *anachah* (a feminine noun indicating moaning, sighing. This response is brought on by physical, spiritual, or mental despair. It involves both body and soul.) *(Word Study)*, or *anaqah* (a feminine noun depicting crying or groaning. It describes the cry and expression of those who are needy or are wrongfully imprisoned) *(Word Study)*

A key is given in Psalm 102: “He will regard the prayer of the destitute and not despise their prayer: This shall be written for the generation to come, and the people which shall be created shall praise the Lord for he hath looked down from the height of his sanctuary, from heaven did the Lord behold the earth to hear the groaning of the prisoner, to loose those that are appointed to death.” *(My emphasis)*

The church is the “generation to come” and the “people which shall be created.” It is part of the church’s ‘mandate’ to reach out to those who are destitute, poor, dead in their sins. In Proverbs, the King’s instruction to his son is “Open thy mouth for the dumb in the cause of all such as are appointed to destruction: Open thy mouth, judge righteously and plead the case of the poor and needy. [Prov 31:8,9]

This is done in intercession as well as in preaching and teaching.

The link between groaning and deliverance is made even more obvious in Acts: “I have seen, I have seen the affliction of my people which is in Egypt and I have heard their groaning and am come down to deliver them.” *(Acts 7:34)* *(My emphasis)*

In Acts 12 vs 5 we read: “Peter therefore was kept in prison, but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him”. The Word Study explains: “Without ceasing: *Young’s Literal Translation* says, ‘fervent’; it means with every bit of strength, as in groaning.”

The result was that an angel was sent to open the prison doors and Peter was delivered.

In Romans chapter 8, Paul speaks of the whole of creation groaning for its deliverance from the bondage of corruption, and adds that it is the Holy Spirit who groans in us too with “groanings which cannot be uttered” to bring God’s will to pass which is the final redemption of the entire creation. *(see also Rom 8:22,23)*

Those groanings are sometimes soundless, being expressed through intense heavings in the spirit.

Paul speaks again of this groaning when writing to the Corinthians: “For in this [tabernacle, ie our bodies] we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven.” *[2Co 5:2]*

For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened, not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life.

Jesus Himself is recorded as “groaning in the spirit” *[Joh 11:33]* and being “troubled”, which *Strong* defines as being “stirred or agitated” and which well describes emotions that accompany intercessory groaning. The result of this was Lazarus’ deliverance from death!

**Conclusion**

Intercessory travail, frequently accompanied by weeping, lamenting and groanings is a normal and necessary part of intercession and is brought on by the anointing of the Holy Spirit to birth or to deliver.

It is however very important to remember that prayer and intercession are areas which are fiercely targeted by satan because of the immense power they make available. Group intercession must be
conducted under the spiritual authority of a God-appointed elder or elders who operate with discerning and can correct any carnal over-zealousness, misunderstanding or deception. Intercessors themselves must be prayed for on a regular basis to protect them and also to let the anointing wash over them for a refreshing when they have been involved in long and draining prayer sessions.

*(See Guidelines on Group Intercession, SI/030)*