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A WOMAN IN LABOR

This is not an article which I am really qualified to write. I have asked a couple of women to write on this subject for me, but they have not yet been able to do so. Perhaps when they see a man's perspective they will write a similar article from the woman's view, and I will publish it as well.

When it comes to pain, we men are wimps. We have a low-grade fever and we are down for a week. Stub a toe or hit a thumb with a hammer and we think the world is coming to an end. At Navy boot camp the Medical Department had to come up with a special protocol to deal with men collapsing in the shot line. We just don't deal well with pain. Women, on the other hand, are equipped by God to endure pain. One of the results of Eve's sin was pain in childbirth, but with that God gave the ability to withstand it. Apparently the prophets (all of them men) thought the pain of childbirth was something with which to frighten other men.

The phrase "a woman in labor" (or "a woman in travail" in the King James Version), or some variation on it, appears seventeen times in the Bible. Most of the time it is used in the same context. Hardships, trials, and conquests were coming. Isaiah and Jeremiah, especially, spoke of the suddenness of these trials. Assyria and Babylon were going to come unexpectedly, to attack Israel or Judah. And when they did, according to these prophets, they would come like "pain, as of a woman in travail." (Ps 48:6; Isa 13:8; Jer 6:24, 22:23; Mic 4:9, etc.) A woman may be at a banquet in the evening, and in the hospital before morning (that is experience speaking). Even though Jeremiah had been prophesying for seventy years, when destruction came it was sudden. In such a way will God bring destruction on the world we know.

For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. (1 Thes 5:2-4)

Paul warns us to be ready for the end. It may be in 2012. It may be before or after that date. For many it may

be tomorrow. We should be ready, like a woman who has her hospital bag packed and waiting by the door.

Sometimes these prophets phrase it differently. They use the words "sorrow, as a woman that travaills." (Jer 13:21, 49:24; Hos 13:13) Some men might even think that this phrase is improper. If you listen to a woman in the late stages of pregnancy you might get the impression that childbirth is preferable to carrying the child. After the birth, the joy in the newborn overtakes the sorrow of labor. But those who have been in the labor and delivery room know that there is a time when there is definitely sorrow. Ask any man whose wife has threatened his life if he ever gets her pregnant again. The punishments God was going to bring on those nations who disobeyed him were to be sorrowful. Both Isaiah and Jeremiah promised a restoration of God's people. Nevertheless, the punishment would bring sorrow.

Jesus used the concept in yet another way. He predicted his death, but added,

A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world. And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you. (Jn 16:21-22)

The apostles would lose him for three days. They would mourn. But a woman in labor ends up joyful, because she has borne a child. We may sorrow for the death Jesus had to die. But we rejoice in the resurrection, like a woman who has come through her travail.

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WHY IS IT THERE?

There is an ancient principle in Judaism regarding the interpretation of scripture. It says that there are no idle words in scripture, and that there are no misplaced words. If God uses an unusual phrasing, adding extra words, it is because he wants us to learn a lesson from it. If God places a seemingly irrelevant verse next to another verse, it may be that there is a reason for it. Using that latter thought, I am going to toss out some questions. They do not necessarily have answers. It is just that the proximity of some verses has gotten me to musing, and my musings may sometimes turn into an article.

Tamar

One chapter that fits this idea is Genesis 38. Genesis 37 ends with Joseph being sold into Egypt. Genesis 39 begins with Joseph arriving in Egypt. Between these two sentences the Bible tells the story of Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar. Why is this story placed here? What does Judah's failure to provide an heir to his line and Tamar's subsequent apparent incest have to do with Joseph going to Egypt? This incident is important to the Judaic lineage, but why put it here? There are several possibilities. God knew that Israel would one day be

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divided, essentially along the lines of Judah and Ephraim (a son of Joseph). Could he have been prefiguring that division by telling of Judah's line in the middle of Joseph's story? Another possibility is that he is contrasting the righteousness of Joseph with the unrighteousness of Judah. A third, though less likely possibility, is that it is merely chronological. This is less likely, because the story of Tamar actually crosses several years, possibly ending about the time that Judah and his brothers went to Egypt and learned that Joseph was still alive.

Lot

“And there was a strife between the herdmen of Abram's cattle and the herdmen of Lot's cattle: and the Canaanite and the Perizzite dwelled then in the land.” (Gen 13:7) Why do these sentences come together? Is it possible that the Canaanites and Perizzites somehow were the instigators of the strife between Abraham's and Lot's herdsman? Did these

two nations move into the area at this time, thus reducing available grazing land, and in that way causing the strife?

“And the LORD said unto Abram, after that Lot was separated from him, Lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward: For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever.” (Gen 13:14-15) Was there a reason that God waited until after Lot separated from Abraham until he established his covenant with Abraham? Was Lot his last tie to the idolatry of Ur? Did God have to wait until all family ties were finally broken? Does this teach us that following God may mean we have to break with family, sometimes?

“And delivered just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked: (For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds.) (2 Pet 2:7-8) If Lot was so vexed with the unlawful deeds of the people of Sodom, why did he stay? Perhaps the two different words translated vexed give an answer. In verse 7 the word means “exhausted with labor.” That would indicate that even Lot's righteousness was being worn down by the evil behavior of his neighbors. The word in verse 8, though, refers to a testing. It comes from the use of a touchstone, a particular type of stone that leaves a distinctive mark on gold or silver. Was Lot intentionally exposing himself to sin to test his own righteousness, and in so doing he was tiring himself out? Did he believe God wanted him there so that he could be an example to these people and maybe save them thereby? If the former, then he was in danger of losing his righteousness. God will test our righteousness enough; we don't have to help him along by exposing ourselves to temptation just to prove ourselves righteous. If the latter, it certainly was not working. Lot's example had no effect on the people of Sodom. He barely got out with his immediate family. He couldn't even influence his prospective sons-in-law. If we are being vexed, in either sense, by the evil around us, maybe it is time for us to do what Lot was forced to do—run away.

Nadab and Abihu

And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the LORD, which he commanded them not. And there went out fire from the LORD, and devoured them, and they died before the LORD. Then Moses said unto Aaron, This is it that the LORD spake, saying, I will be sanctified in them that come nigh me, and before all the people I will be glorified. And Aaron

held his peace. And Moses called Mishael and Elzaphan, the sons of Uzziel the uncle of Aaron, and said unto them, Come near, carry your brethren from before the sanctuary out of the camp. So they went near, and carried them in their coats out of the camp; as Moses had said. And Moses said unto Aaron, and unto Eleazar and unto Ithamar, his sons, Uncover not your heads, neither rend your clothes; lest ye die, and lest wrath come upon all the people: but let your brethren, the whole house of Israel, bewail the burning which the LORD hath kindled. But you are not to leave the entrance of the Tabernacle, under penalty of death, for the anointing oil of the LORD is upon you." So they did as Moses commanded. Then the LORD said to Aaron, "You and your descendants must never drink wine or any other alcoholic drink before going into the Tabernacle. If you do, you will die. This is a permanent law for you, and it must be kept by all future generations. (Lev 10:1-9)

It is easy to see why God commanded Aaron and his remaining sons not to mourn the deaths of Nadab and Abihu. They were in the period of consecration as priests, and to leave the Tabernacle to mourn would require that they start the whole process over again. But why is the last commandment included at this point? All my life I have heard these two men reviled because they offered strange fire. What prompted them to do such a thing, and to do it while they were in the process of consecration? Is this an indication that Nadab and Abihu may have been drunk while performing their duties? This seems to indicate that it was not just their violation of the command, but maybe more importantly it was their attitude that resulted in their deaths. Serving the Lord was not so important that they would change their lives to do it.

Whether this can be used as a rule today for those attending an assembly of the church is questionable. We may not be able to say that one sins if he comes to the assembly after having taken a drink of alcohol. Nevertheless, we can say that God expects his people to put him first. We are not to let anything interfere with our ability to praise God and to obey him. For some people that may include not taking a drink. For others it may involve something else that may control their lives. Ultimately, God asks us to put him in the place of these things of this world that interfere with our life in him.

Korah

In Numbers 15 a man is stoned for violating the Sabbath. After that account God tells the Israelites to wear fringes on the corners of their garments to remind them of the requirements of the law. Immediately after that, in chapter 16, we read the account of Korah's rebellion. What prompted the rebellion? The excuse they used was that "all the congregation are holy." If everyone was to wear fringes, then everyone was in a special position before God, who dwelt among them. But this seems to be

a mere excuse, a justification for rebellion. What was the root cause? Was it the stoning of the man who gathered sticks on the Sabbath? Perhaps this man was a friend or relative or Korah or one of his cohorts. Perhaps Korah was opposed to capital punishment. Perhaps Korah just thought he should have been on the jury.

One thing that we can learn from this incident is that our motives are not always clear to us. Sometimes we justify ourselves with high-sounding reasons, when our real motives are considerably more base. Before we rebel against God, we need to examine ourselves to be sure that we know exactly why we are doing what we are doing. Only after doing so can we proceed with confidence that we are in the right.

The Greek Seven

The Christians in Acts 6 had a problem. The people from outside Judea who had become Christians were being neglected in the distribution of food to the non-locals. The apostles decreed that their job was teaching, not waiting tables. So they agreed to choose men for this job.

And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor,

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and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch: Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them. And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:5-7)

The question is, did the choice of Steven and his companions have a direct effect on the increase of the word of God and the multiplication of believers? Perhaps it did. When others saw the Christians take care of their own, *all* their own, others may have realized that this new Way was special. When people stop acting like everyone else and start acting like the Messiah, it is noticed. People see the change and want to be part of it.

These are only a few of many questions brought about by the proximity of certain sentences or chapters to a seemingly unrelated matter. Some of the questions may still be unanswered. But maybe this will help us all to look at the scriptures in a new way. Instead of just reading to be reading, may we now ask ourselves why what we are reading is where it is.

A BEAUTY PAGEANT

It is a new year. That means that we have just had the Miss America Pageant™ and will soon be celebrating the results of a more ancient beauty pageant. The holiday of Purim falls on February 28 in 2010, and celebrates the salvation of the Jewish people from Persian oppression. That salvation was brought about, in part, through a woman named Hadassah (commonly called Esther), who was in a position to save her people because she had participated in a beauty pageant.

King Ahasuerus had demoted his former head wife for insubordination. Now, it is important that a king's head wife not be ugly. She has to deal with heads of state, and the king doesn't want them to think he is a loser. After all, look what problems Henry VIII had with horse-faced Anne of Cleves. (That marriage, never consummated, lasted three days over seven months, but at least she survived alive.) So Ahasuerus ordered all beautiful, eligible young women to participate in his contest to find a new head wife (not to be confused with a headmistress). Although of Jewish descent, Esther joined in the festivities. The Jews have long objected to such displays of physical attributes, and they were also less than the favored people of the empire. Without revealing her lineage, she participated in the beauty contest, and won.

After Hxaxmxaxn (the x's are my way of making printed noise to drown out his name) got the king to decree the genocide of all the Jews in his domain (which was most of the Jews in the world), Esther was in a position to save her people. This is when Uncle Mordechai delivered the famous line, "Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esth 4:14) He recognized that

she may have won the beauty contest solely so she could be in that position at that time. She used her position to alter the decree.

Some people tend to emphasize the potential danger of her position. In point of fact, her beauty minimized that danger. In fact, her beauty helped her to seduce her enemy into a compromising position. The salvation that resulted from this whole situation led to the annual celebration known as Purim.

There are many people who object to beauty pageants, and sometimes for very good reasons. They objectify women. They are so competitive that they cause people to act in a variety of unkind ways. They even affect politics. (It is said that one of the main reasons Puerto Rico keeps voting down statehood in the United States is that they would lose their solo representation in the Miss Universe Pageant™.) Nevertheless, women of God have participated in these pageants with positive results. They have been positive role models to others in the pageant industry, sometimes leading them to faith in God. As seen last year, they have also been able to use the pageant as a platform for speaking out for the truth, even when they might lose the pageant by so doing.

Beauty pageants in the Bible have led to some amazing winners, such as Daniel and Esther. (Yes, the Bible has beauty pageants for men, too.) They have also had some surprising winners (David was the last choice of one of the judges in the King of Israel Pageant). One thing that can be said about them. They have afforded people of God opportunities they might not otherwise have had. The pageants have put people in various positions "for such a time as this."

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