

John 16:21

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

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.

Analysis

Jesus employs childbirth as metaphor for the crucifixion-resurrection pattern: **A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come** (ἡ γυνὴ ὅταν τίκτῃ λύπην ἔχει, ὅτι ἦλθεν ἡ ὥρα αὐτῆς/hē gynē hotan tiktē lypēn echei, hoti ēlthen hē hōra autēs). The present tense τίκτω (tiktō, "to give birth") describes active labor; λύπη (lypē) is pain, anguish, distress. The phrase ἡ ὥρα (hē hōra, "the hour") connects to Jesus's own "hour"—His appointed time of suffering (John 12:23, 27; 13:1; 17:1).

But as soon as she is delivered of the child (ὅταν δὲ γεννήσῃ τὸ παιδίον/hotan de gennēsē to paidion)—the subjunctive mood indicates certainty of outcome. Pain will definitely yield to birth.

She remembereth no more the anguish (οὐκέτι μνημονεύει τῆς θλίψεως/ouketi mnēmoneuei tēs thlipseōs)—not that she forgets, but the memory loses its power to cause grief. Θλίψις (thlipsis) means pressure, tribulation, affliction—but joy eclipses pain.

For joy that a man is born into the world (διὰ τὴν χαρὰν ὅτι ἐγεννήθη ἄνθρωπος εἰς τὸν κόσμον/dia tēn charan hoti egennēthē anthrōpos eis ton kosmon)—new life justifies the suffering. The metaphor illuminates resurrection:

Christ's death-pangs birth new creation, eternal life for believers (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Historical Context

Childbirth was perilous in the ancient world, with high maternal mortality rates. Every woman in labor faced real danger—yet the joy of new life overshadowed the trauma. Jesus's original audience (particularly women) understood this viscerally. Old Testament prophets used birth pangs to describe Israel's tribulations (Isaiah 26:17-19, Micah 4:9-10). Jesus applies it personally: His suffering births spiritual offspring (Isaiah 53:10-11). The early church experienced this pattern repeatedly—persecution's pain yielding evangelistic harvest, martyrs' blood birthing church growth. Paul used labor imagery for his apostolic ministry and the creation's groaning (Galatians 4:19, Romans 8:22).

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. How does the childbirth metaphor help you understand that suffering can be productive, purposeful, and ultimately joyful rather than meaningless?
2. What 'new birth' resulted from Christ's crucifixion-suffering, and how does this transform how you view the cross?
3. When have you experienced a 'labor pains to new life' pattern where God used suffering to birth something beautiful?

Interlinear Text

ἡ γυνὴ ὅταν τίκτη λύπην ἔχει ὅτι ἦλθεν
G3588 A woman as soon as she is in travail sorrow hath because is come
G1135 G3752 G5088 G3077 G2192 G3754 G2064

ἡ ὥρα αὐτῆς· ὅταν δὲ ἐγεννήθη τὸ παιδίον οὐκ
G3588 hour her as soon as but is born G3588 of the child G3756
G5610 G846 G3752 G1161 G1080 G3813

ἔτι μνημονεύει τῆς θλίψεως διὰ τὴν χαρὰν ὅτι
more she remembereth G3588 the anguish for G3588 joy because
G2089 G3421 G2347 G1223 G5479 G3754

ἐγεννήθη ἄνθρωπος εἰς τὸν κόσμον
is born a man into G3588 the world
G1080 G444 G1519 G2889

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 113:9 (Parallel theme): He maketh the barren woman to keep house, and to be a joyful mother of children. Praise ye the LORD.

Isaiah 13:8 (Parallel theme): And they shall be afraid: pangs and sorrows shall take hold of them; they shall be in pain as a woman that travaileth: they shall be amazed one at another; their faces shall be as flames.

1 Thessalonians 5:3 (Parallel theme): 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.

Micah 4:10 (Parallel theme): Be in pain, and labour to bring forth, O daughter of Zion, like a woman in travail: for now shalt thou go forth out of the city, and thou shalt dwell in the field, and thou shalt go even to Babylon; there shalt thou be delivered; there the LORD shall redeem thee from the hand of thine enemies.