Are the Things That Try Our Faith Really Worth the Risk?

+ In Nomine Jesu +

Imagine you’re handed a script of your newborn child’s life. You read that she’ll be healthy, but have a learning disability that will result in her coming home in tears many days from struggling so much and from the other kids making fun of her. In high school, she’ll make close friends with a girl who will be like a sister to your daughter, but the girl will die of cancer. After high school, she’ll get into the college of her dreams, but while there, she’ll lose a leg in a car accident. After college, she’ll get a great job in the field she loves, but she’ll go through a difficult depression that will end in an attempted suicide. A few years later she’ll have the joy of falling in love and getting married, but then go through the grief of a troubled marriage and divorce.

Now imagine that you are given a magic eraser that can wipe out whatever you want to from the script of your daughter’s life, so that whatever you erase on the paper, she won’t experience in life. Knowing what you know of her life and having the power to edit it, what would you erase? ... I think all of us would instantly and probably frantically take our eraser to her greatest weaknesses, her biggest losses, her most painful struggles. That’s only natural. We want to spare those we love, especially our children, pain and misery.

God, of course, doesn’t do that. The One who actually has our life script and the eraser to wipe out the things that plague and hurt us most, doesn’t use it! On the contrary, God makes sure that we all suffer those special afflictions, those one, two, maybe even three thorns in the flesh that really torture us! This is all confirmed by our text. Look again. Perhaps the most compelling line in the story of Naaman is “But he had leprosy.” Naaman was, in every other way, blessed with pleasant things - success, accomplishment, wealth, esteem, respect, virtue. But as great a man as he was, he was not without his special thorn, his great affliction, his “but he had.” In his case it was leprosy. And he’s not the only one. The young girl from Israel also had her “but she had.” You see it? Her captivity! I’d say the trauma of being taken by force from your parents and home at a young age, and forced into slavery is a large, painful thorn in the flesh. Even the king of Israel had his “but he had.” It was his fear of attack by the Arameans. So, as you can see, God did not erase but made sure the people in our text had their special woes, just as he has made sure to do for each of us!

We all know this, and we all know in our heads, at least, the wisdom of God giving us our special thorns and crosses: God uses them to prove our faith to us, that is, to prove to us that the Holy Spirit has given us the real deal, that Word and sacraments really do work to overcome our doubts, enable us to take God at his word, and save us, as our thorns give our faith the opportunity to show itself by trusting God in our pain. We know God uses our special thorns to doubt-proof our faith by using them like fire in a smelting furnace to burn away all that passes as faith but really isn’t. The thing is giving us these special afflictions, which put our faith to the test, always comes with an inherent risk - the risk that our faith may fail, that the ship may sink, that the gold may get too melted down! So, the question becomes: Do the possible benefits of our special thorns outweigh the risks to our faith? Are the Things That Try Our Faith Really Worth the Risk?

As we consider our text, at first glance, it doesn’t seem so. In giving Naaman his thorn, his special messenger of Satan to torment him, God, of course, rolled the dice that Naaman would despair of the true God altogether! God risked Naaman becoming a hardened skeptic, a staunch atheist who angrily denied the existence of God for letting such pain as he had come to know enter the world. In giving the young Jewish girl the affliction of being snatched from her parents and home, the Lord rolled the dice of losing her to despair too. He risked her turning into an agnostic. “Where was God when I needed him most?” The risk of falling into despair in these big afflictions is real, as we in the king of Israel.

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Aram had sent and reads how the king of Aram wants him to heal Naaman of his leprosy, the king of Israel thinks that Aram is trying to pick a fight with Israel. “See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!” he tells his court. At that moment, the thorn of the fear of a costly war with Aram pressed into his flesh. When it did what did the king of Israel do? Did he fall on his knees and pray to God? Did he call for Pastor Elisha to comfort and encourage him with God’s promises and counsel him from God’s word? No! He “tore his robes” in hopeless grief. “All is lost! We’re doomed!” This thorn did not snap him out of his unbelief and bring him to God, did it? In his unbelief, his thorn seemed to drive him away from God into the pit of despair!

We all know about the risk of despairing of God and his promises in him allowing or sending us those special thorns and afflictions that torment us. We’ve all danced on the edge of despair, as we’ve suffered the pain of our thorns. In the pain of our thorns, we’ve all felt that God has been fickle - telling us to pray to him in the day of trouble, then having us wait for his response, giving us hope, then vanishing into the mist. We’ve all felt forgotten and punished by God, or insignificant to him. We’ve all felt lost, helpless, and hopeless in ever finding relief. And if you haven’t known those feelings yet in pain, oh, just wait. You will. You will.

Are the Things That Try Our Faith Really Worth the Risk? It sure doesn’t seem so. In giving Naaman, the young girl from Israel, and the king of Israel their particular thorns, God rolled the dice that, if they didn’t fall into the ditch of despair, they would fall into the other ditch - the ditch of pride, the ditch of thinking they knew best how and when God should solve their problems and deal with their afflictions! Just as with the pit of despair, the risk of falling into the pit of pride is very real, as Naaman shows! When he goes and finds Elisha, he has very clearly in mind how this is all going to play out: “Elisha will come out, stand before me, wave his ‘magic’ arm over my leprous skin, and say, ‘In the name of the LORD, be clean!’ And poof that’ll be that!” But when he arrives, Naaman finds nothing as he expects. First, Elisha doesn’t even come in person but sends a servant out to him. Then, the message is nothing as Naaman had thought it should be. The servant doesn’t wave his hand over Naaman and say, “Be clean!” He tells him, “Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan.” What did Naaman do? He “went away angry,” “in a rage,” even! Why? Because in his natural arrogance he thought he knew best how God should answer his prayers and solve his problems! So when God’s way didn’t match with his way, God’s way seemed foolish and fake, and he felt conned.

We all know about the risk of pride in our God-given thorns too! Think about the prayer of the leper in the Gospel, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.” What a prayer! It shows full confidence that Jesus has the power and mercy to cure an incurable disease! At the same time, his prayer reveals the humble trust that Jesus knows what is best, and will either give him what he prays for or something better. The leper knows that it might not be Jesus’ will to heal him, in which case he is ready to accept that somehow his leprosy is best, because he trusts that Jesus knows what is best for him, and will do it. Consider that prayer. Then compare it to some of your prayers in affliction. They aren’t like that. No, sometimes, we come to God like Naaman, proudly thinking we know best how and when God should solve our problems and take care of our thorns, namely, poof them away immediately, if not sooner! We all but tell him as much!

Are the Things That Try Our Faith Really Worth the Risk? Actually, they sure are! They sure are because - and you must never forget this - because God never takes risks with our faith and salvation, but in grace and mercy sends us only the afflictions he will work for our salvation and the good of his kingdom! To put it another way, our particular afflictions and thorns are worth the risk, because when the Lord “rolls the dice” in giving us our afflictions, he is making sure that we win, and win big!

We see that so clearly in the account of Naaman. By his carefully doled out thorns and afflictions, the Lord gathers his elect and drives them to his word. Naaman’s thorn of leprosy does not become an obstacle to him coming to the Lord, as Satan and his own nature intended, does it? On the contrary, the Lord used his
severe illness and suffering as precisely the impetus for Naaman to despair of his own gods and abilities, and end up outside the door of the Lord’s prophet, at the very feet of the one true God!

What was true of Naaman is true of you and me. As the Lord tells us through Paul only one thing is sufficient for life: no, not comfort, success, and accolades; no, not even family, friends, freedom from pain, and total victory over every temptation and weakness; grace, only knowing and living in the truth that for reasons of his own that have nothing to do with any good qualities or works in me God chose to love me, and in that love, God gave me his Son, who did everything to achieve my eternal salvation, and in that love, the Lord ruled over history, so that I would hear about Jesus, and by hearing the word of Christ be given the gift of faith in him by the Holy Spirit, yes, only that is sufficient for life. Knowing and living in the grace of God alone is sufficient, enough to give us the life of peace, strength, praise of God, and never-ending glory that God wants us to have. But without our special thorns pressing painfully into our flesh, we would never understand and believe that! We would congratulate God for calling us, because see how we’ve proven ourselves worthy of his call - we’ve risen above the common herd with all their woes, temptations, and struggles. Ah, but our thorns never let us believe that faith-destroying, salvation-wrecking lie! No, our thorns and the pain and frustration they bring keep knocking us down and crushing us. Our imperfect responses to our thorns, our moments of despair and pride, reveal to us how spiritually weak we are. And so, all we’re left to do is crawl to the grace of God in the cross of his Son. “Lord, if you are willing, you can take this away. If you will not, then help me. I trust you will, because you loved me enough to die for me. You rose from the dead to rule over all my foes and woes! Lord, forgive my despair! Forgive my pride! I know you do. Your blood streaming to me in the waters of baptism has cleansed me and more than restored me, even as, the water of the Jordan, by your power, cleansed and more than restored Naaman’s flesh.” And so, we’re blessed and saved through our thorns!

By his carefully doled out thorns the Lord always works the best for his kingdom, as he uses his people’s pain as the opportunity to share the gospel and comfort and strength others when it’s their turn to suffer. Thereby, he makes sure that not one pain of his people ever goes to waste! We see this in the case of the young girl from Israel. Her pain and that of her parents in her being taken from her home was not a pointless waste! God used precisely that trial to achieve the greatest purpose for his kingdom - to bring his salvation to Naaman and grow his kingdom by one! And God took good care of her to boot!

What God did for that young girl, he does for you and me. He never lets our thorns and the pain they bring go to waste, but uses them to accomplish the greatest good, not just for us but for his kingdom, his Bride. So, our car breaks down in the middle of the road, and the Lord uses that as the opportunity to come into contact with the person who comes to our aid, and invite them to church. We end up in a hospital. God uses that as the opportunity to share the gospel with the nurse attending us or the person in the bed next to us about to die without knowing Jesus. Through our trial the Lord is with us and is taking good care of us!

All these are the chips the Lord pushes in front of us as he rolls the dice in giving us our thorns! So what say we cash in on the riches God gives us in all that tries our faith. Let us daily turn to Christ and his promises and receive strength to bear up under our special crosses and afflictions. Let us pour out our lament to him, because as King David shows in the Psalms our laments make obvious our intense faith in God; they demonstrate just how deep our relationship with the Father really is. After all, we don’t pound our fists in grief on the chests of strangers. We save that for those we truly know and love. Let us pray the leper’s prayer of trust and humility, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.” Let us not waste time living in gloom and doom because of our thorns, but in joy and gratitude to God for them, in the recognition that God will richly bless us and do what is best for us through them! Let us keep our eyes open for those around us as they suffer their afflictions, and seize the opportunity to comfort them in their troubles with the comfort we have received from God in ours! Let us do this and show the worth God even gives to our thorns! Amen!