When the Going Gets Tough, See How Tough God Is!

+ In Nomine Jesu +

The movie *Rabbit Hole* starring Nicole Kidman tells the story of a couple trying to come to terms with the death of their four-year-old son. In one scene Nicole Kidman’s character, Becca, and her husband are attending a grief group for the first time.

The couple sits quietly as a man mournfully tells of how his dead daughter comes to him in his dreams. “She tells me that she’s okay. She’s with God,” he says. When his grief gets particularly heavy, he talks about how important it is to remember that, and remember that God had a purpose for this huge loss. “We just have to remind ourselves that it’s part of God’s plan. We can’t know why. Only God can know why.”

At this point his wife jumps in, “God had to take her. He needed another angel.”

Becca listens impatiently, and not being able to contain herself any longer, blurts out, “Why didn’t he just make one, another angel? I mean, he’s God, after all. Why didn’t he just make another angel? Hmm?”

Becca’s pained question portrays well the struggle people often have with God in bereavement or a major crisis, and it illustrates a scriptural truth that we see particularly well in our text today: God often comes across to his people not as their Father and Friend, but as their *enemy*!

Just look at poor Job in our text. When the Lord introduces him to us, he introduces Job as one of the finest Christians on the planet, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, a man with a passion to serve God like no other. So, what does God do for the finest Christian in his kingdom? God puts a bulls-eye on Job for Satan to shoot at! “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him. He is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.” And so, God incites and invites Satan to strike at his most devout servant! From that moment on, Job suffers one unbearable tragedy after another. In one day he goes from being one of the richest men on earth to destitute poverty. On that very same day, while Job is still trying to process the loss of his life saving’s and income, a messenger tells him that all ten of his children were killed in a freak storm. Things for Job are as bad as they can get, and only get worse from there! On another day his body breaks out in painful, itchy boils from the tip of his head to the soles of his feet. He has lost what most people would call “everything” - his wealth, his health, his family. Then God takes even more! He sees to it that his faithful servant is deprived of any love and support he would have received from his wife and closest friends! She tells him to “Curse God and die.” They tell him that he has only himself to blame for all his misery! As we watch his back and forth with his so-called friends, it’s clear that there are a lot of things about his suffering Job doesn’t understand. But this one thing he does: the source of his pain, his loss, his desolation is God, himself, the God whom he loved and served so faithfully all his life!

Well, this begs the question: why does the merciful God, who loves his people, come across to them, at times, like a ruthless enemy? It seems so counterproductive to his stated wish that everyone be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. I mean, the book of Job doesn’t exactly make for a good evangelism hook, now does it? Trust in and follow the God, who for reasons of his own, may turn your life into a torture chamber. Plus, when the going gets tough for us, it gets tough for God, tough for him to keep us! Our reason forges our pain into a sharp spike and stabs our faith with it, riddling it with doubts and chipping it away!

Just look at what happened to Job’s faith beneath the crushing weight of his woes! When his almost ridiculous tragedy first struck Job, he handled it as well as anyone possibly could handle such hardship. He accepted it all without the need to have it explained or or for God to justify himself in sending it. But as Job’s intense suffering ground on, it wore down his faith! When we meet Job here in our text months into his mammoth misery his faith isn’t doing so hot. Job turns to God to pick his bone with him - which in and of
itself is not a sign of weakness - but it’s clear that in his suffering Job’s faith has gone blind to God’s past blessings. What does he have to tell God about what he thinks of God’s gift of earthly life? Look at verse one: “Does not man have hard service on earth? Are not his days like those of a hired man?” When Job looks at life behind the spectacles of his pain all he sees in life is a life-sentence of hard labor. Wait a minute, though. Before the two worst days in his life God not strung together for Job a long pearl of blessed, happy days? Sure he had, but in his misery Job can’t see that now! Having no one to feel sorry for him or commiserate with him with his wife and friends turned against him, Job ends up wallowing in his own misery and self-pity! This devout believer, once filled with the purpose of serving God has now in his pain lost all sense of purpose. What does he say his life is? “My life is...but a breath” - Vapor. Nothing. This man of God given a living hope in the coming Savior by the Holy Spirit has lost all hope for his life. “My days...end without hope...My eyes will never see happiness again.” And when we read the rest of the chapter, we see how his hurting, beleaguered soul has come to view the God he so deeply loved and faithfully served - as a nitpicking, unforgiving tyrant! “Leave me alone!” he pleads with God, “Why won’t you just leave me alone! I despise myself. Why are you making such a big deal of me? Why do you feel you have to scrutinize my every move, and nitpick every little thing I do, and pay me back for every little thing I do wrong that I don’t even realize I’ve done wrong. Speaking of which, what exactly have I done to you? Why have you made me your target? Why won’t you forgive me? Or, are you just sick and tired of me? Is that it?”

Why does God do that? Why does the God and Father of his children allow and even send such pain and suffering into the lives of his people, painting him into their enemy? Is that really what is best? Is he not shooting himself in the foot, as far as achieving what he wants from his people? God wants his people to trust his word and promises. He wants his people to love and serve him. In Job he already had a superb model of the kind of believer he sought. What did God seem to accomplish by putting Job through all this suffering? God seemed to undo the good work he produced in Job! In his suffering Job is reduced to a shadow of his former devout self! His pain did not seem to build up his faith at all, but tear it down!

These questions that we have for God in Job’s suffering are the very ones we have for God in ours. Our loved one got sick. We prayed with fervent and frequent prayers to the God we knew and trusted could heal if he wanted to, but our loved one did not get better, but died. A temptation gnaws, an addiction takes hold with such force that there seems to be no escape from either the grip of the sin or the crushing guilt that follows our fall. We get hit with a series of set backs, struggles, or worries that weigh us down and weary us. Then there is that one problem, that one hurt, that one woe that makes life bitter and miserable. No matter how often and for how long it lies dormant, something always triggers a flare-up. When it hits, like King Hezekiah our hurting soul turns its face to the wall and weeps and cries to God for help, but there is no measurable relief or improvement. God seems stone-faced to our prayers and our pain. And then right here when we are at our weakest, at our lowest, our sinful nature and the devil team up to drop this heavy cross on top of our already heavy burden: See what you get for following Jesus - a whole lot of trouble and misery that you just have to take. See how capricious God is: no matter how much you love him, no matter how faithful and devoted you are to serving him, it isn’t good enough; you’re still going to hurt, if he wants you to, and so, no matter how hard or often you pray, it isn’t going to matter; he won’t help you! You know, maybe, he’s just had all he can take of you. Maybe he’s still mad at you over the past, and that’s why this has come back to haunt you.” As it did for Job, our pain and that cross can grind us down, leaving us not strong, resilient, confident, faithful Christians but impatient, frustrated, doubtful, and discouraged ones!

Why does God do this? Why does he let himself be painted as our enemy when, in fact, he is our dear Father all along? ... That we might come to know him all the more as our all-merciful and almighty Father! You see, when the going gets tough, it’s then and only then that we really get to see how tough our God is! In our pain and suffering, we come to see better how tough, how strong and mighty God’s love for us in Christ is. When things aren’t going well, when you’re not feeling well, when you get hurt and feel sad, when you face
your decline and death or that of a dear one, you come to see better the ugliness of sin and the misery it brings, because even though, as in the case of Job, no specific sin may be the cause of your particular pain, sin in general is the root cause of all the suffering and brokenness we experience in life. When you are having pangs of conscience and feel as if God has become your enemy, you don’t need too much convincing of the reality of hell; you can already smell its sulfur and feel the heat of its flames. It’s horrible. You long for relief, but the one thing you don’t wish for is for the people you love dearly, to go through what you’re going through. Job, for instance, didn’t wish his suffering even on his friends who were tormenting him. No, our desire is to do the best we can to spare our loved ones from going through what we do. And here is where we see the strong, mighty love of God for us in his Son: our Father in heaven did not do his best to spare his only Son who was his crown and joy the suffering of sin and the torment of hell! No, he freely gave him to suffering our sin that has brought such pain into our lives to deliver us from all pain and misery forever! What great love!

In our pain and suffering, we come to see how tough God is, how strong he is, in overcoming his people’s weakness through the lowly news of Christ in Word and sacraments! What is the great miracle we witness in this text? That Job prays at all! That he turns to the God who appears as his enemy. “Remember, O God...” Job prays. That’s a mighty miracle! Job realizes that the severe blows he’s been dealt have come ultimately not from the hands of the devil, but from the hands of God, whom he worshipped and adored, whom he loved and served so faithfully! Knowing that how does Job still turn to the Lord in prayer? The answer, the only answer is the gospel! The news of his coming Savior that he knew, that had miraculously sparked him to faith, and that was still hidden in the deep recesses of his heart, sustained him in his darkest hour. In the same way, our own suffering and crosses enable us to see better the power of the good news of our Savior to sustain us in our struggles! In our pain, our reason and the devil dress themselves in the robes of Job’s wife and counsel us: “Curse God and die!” But we don’t! No, we cry - however, imperfectly - we cry, “Lord, have mercy! Christ, have mercy! Lord, have mercy!” “Lord, remember your mercy and love to me!” That is the power of Christ in you and me, and our pain and suffering only proves it all the more!

In our pain and suffering, we see how tough God is, how staunchly committed he is, to his promise to work all things, especially pain and suffering, for the good of his people, and to end their pain! We see this in Job! Because of his pain, and not apart form it Job, cries to God, and gets his audience. And, as we see in the final chapters of the book, even before God restores him or there is even a hint that he will, Job is satisfied! So, we see that through his great suffering, Job ends up more trusting, more hopeful, stronger, yes more joyful and a better servant after his great pain than before; he ends up far better than he ever would have without his pain! And even though, Job felt that his suffering would never end and that he would “never see happiness again,” his suffering was, in fact, temporary! The Lord relieved and restored him greatly in this life, and, of course, he always had heaven to look forward to. See God keep his promise to do you good through your pain! As promised, the Holy Spirit uses especially your pain to drive you to Jesus! There at the foot of the cross and empty tomb, the Holy Spirit renews your hope and trust in Christ that triumphs even if your pain and suffering continues or worsens! And so, we are left stronger, better servants than we were before our suffering, than we would ever have been without it. And because of Christ’s suffering and triumph, our days of suffering and pain are only temporary. Really they are! As with Job, no matter the struggle, your eyes will see happiness again! You will be relieved of your pain and restored, in many cases, partially in this life, as you can already attest to by past experience; and if not in this life, then surely in the life to come!

So, When the Going Gets Tough, See How Tough God Is! See how greatly he loves you in Jesus! See how powerful he is to sustain you in your darkest hour and deepest hurt! See how committed he is to using especially your pain to make you better than ever and to end your pain and tears. And let that give you such strength that you can even do as Paul says - rejoice in your struggles and thank God for them - until the day your Lord, your Savior, your Friend, turns your wailing into dancing! Amen.