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It would be hard to pick my least favorite part of the whole experience, but definitely near the top would be the IV. It took seven different nurses, trying nine different times to get an IV successfully in place. Which meant nine different times I stood holding his hand, singing to him, talking to him while he looked at me and screamed. His eyes, full of wild fear and pain and tears, locked with mine – and even though the words weren't there, I knew what he was thinking, "Daddy, save me, pick me up, stop these people from doing this to me." It is hands down one of the most heartbreaking experiences of my life.

But I didn't pick him up. I didn't stop the nurses from forcing his arms and legs into awkward positions and stabbing him over and over and over. As he lay there, screaming on the top of his lungs, looking at me with panic and pain in his eyes, I didn't save him because even though every bone in my body wanted to stop them, even though he couldn't understand why, I knew that this was what he needed. He needed to endure this pain, he needed to walk through this fire so that he could get better. I let him be hurt that day because I knew better than he did what he needed at that moment. I let him be hurt because I am his father and I love him...

There is a Latin word for what Ezra, Laura, and I went through that day – a Latin word used by Martin Luther: *Tentatio*. There really isn't one English word that covers what *Tentatio* means. *Tentatio* is trials, struggles, temptation, suffering, affliction – simply put, it is any bad thing that happens to us in this life that tempts us to sin, or hurts us physically or emotionally. *Tentatio* is living at Children's Hospital for 19 days as your son suffers from some mysterious, undiagnosed illness. *Tentatio* covers everything from getting caught in a traffic jam to getting your car totaled in a multicar pileup, from losing your wallet to losing your job, from getting a cold to being diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease.

Tentatio is a word Martin Luther used to describe a truth he discovered in the Bible – a truth about how God operates in this world; a truth about how God goes about getting us to heaven; a truth we see in all three readings for today.

In Luke 9 Jesus said that if anyone would follow him to heaven he must carry a cross, he must lose his life – he must be willing to go through *Tentatio*.

Moses in Hebrews is held up as an example of saving faith because he willingly accepted that disgrace, danger, and suffering (aka *Tentatio*) was a necessary part of knowing and following God.

And in Zechariah, the basis for this sermon, God promises, "I will turn my hand against the little ones (the sheep, the followers of Jesus, us)... two-thirds will be stuck down and perish; yet one-third will be left... This third I will put into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold."

God's explicit promise for us today: I will make you suffer. I will make your life like walking through fire.

"Now wait just a minute," you may be thinking, "this is God's grand plan for getting us to heaven – making us suffer; filling our lives with *Tentatio*?"

If a part of you cringes at the thought of your God purposefully putting you through the fires of suffering in this world, I don't blame you. That cringing is a product of the world you have grown up in.

Think about how much time and money and brainpower our world has spent on *avoiding*, or at the very least *lessening*, affliction, pain, and suffering.

We go home to comfortably heated and cooled homes so we never have to be too cold or too hot. We wear comfortably fitted clothes with specially printed tags so that there is no chance for even the slightest irritation. We sleep in beds made just to our specifications so we don't wake up with back pain, under sheets with thread counts that would be the envy of the richest men in ages past.

We live in a world where discomfort and pain are unacceptable and often unnecessary – even childbirth can be rendered relatively pain-free because of the tireless pursuit of modern medicine to reduce and remove suffering.

We live in a world obsessed with avoiding suffering.

In a world like this, sitting here today, listening to God's promise to put you through *Tentatio*, affliction, hurt, suffering – this is about as countercultural as we could get.

And yet, here we are, listening to the promise of God: "I will turn my hand against the little ones... two-thirds will be stuck down and perish; yet one-third will be left... This third I will put into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold."

How is this okay? How could this possibly be in the plans of a good and loving God?

How could suffering be good? Well, it turns out that suffering is exactly what we need if we are going to get from this world to heaven, because it turns out that we are not all that different from metal.

When you pull a hunk of gold or silver from the ground, it is never pure gold or silver. It's usually a rock that has a vein of gold running through it, or a hunk of gold with a bunch of other metals and other non-valuable minerals mixed together with it. So what do miners do with that hunk of gold? They can't just wash out the impurities with a little dawn dish soap and elbow grease. They can't pick it out with teasers and a magnifying glass. They can't get the impurities out by taking a hammer and chisel to it. What do they do? They melt it. They stick it into a really hot fire to separate gold from non-gold, to

burn off any impurities that are mixed in with the gold – the process known as refining the gold.

God says his plan for us is kind of like that miner with his gold. God is the miner. We are the gold.

Right now we are not as we should be. God came to us and created in our hearts of stone veins of gold. He planted faith in our hearts, faith in Jesus as our Savior, faith that is genuinely beautiful and beyond value, faith that creates in our hearts a desire to be the kind of people God wants us to be.

But just like that raw gold from the ground, that faith in your heart has all sorts of impurities mixed in with it. Right alongside that desire to know God better is a desire to sleep in on Sunday mornings or skip out on reading your Bible, or coming to a Bible class because you have other things you want to do. Right alongside that desire to love your spouse well, to be the best employee you can be, is a desire to love yourself. Right alongside that desire to find your real home and your real hope for the future in heaven with God is a desire to carve out a utopia, a little slice of comfort and hope in this world and in the things and people of this world.

You are not as you should be. There are impurities mixed in with the gold.

And so God comes with fire, suffering, *Tentatio* because it's the only way those rocky impurities of our hearts can be burned away.

God comes with fire, suffering, *Tentatio* because suffering in this world forces us to come face to face with some refining realities: Namely, we need God. We need him way more than our impure hearts tend to realize.

We think that personal health can make us happy but when our health deteriorates, we come face to face with the reality that we were hoping our health would give us something only God can give us – true and lasting happiness.

We think that our families can give us hope and equip us to handle the future, but when our families die on us we come face to face with the reality that we were hoping our families would give us something only God can give us – hope and a future.

And on and on the list goes.

And so in love God puts us through the often painful process of idol smashing – burning away the impurities in our hearts that keep us from realizing just how much we need God and just how much he is offering us.

This is what Isaiah called God's "**strange work, his alien task.**" Through affliction, suffering, and pain God shows us how much he loves us. Through *Tentatio* God draws people closer to himself and closer to heaven. It's strange, it's alien because every ounce of our common sense is screaming out, "Stop this, save us, how can this be loving?"... just like that little boy on that bed in the Emergency Room. We can't always understand why, it is strange and terrifying that this would be considered an act of love, but just because we don't understand, just because it is scary, doesn't change the fact that it is love – love more amazing and unrelenting than any love you have ever known.

Tentatio is God's way of grabbing us by the shoulders when we are tempted to turn our backs on him, tempted to run down the broad and wide path to hell, and turn us

around. It's his way of saying, "Look at me. That, whatever you are chasing cannot and will not save you from this world and yourself. Look at me. Look at my Son. Look at his cross and empty tomb. Look at my love. This is the only thing that matters."

Yes, sometimes God's refining fires are unspeakably painful, and those fires, large and small alike will not stop until we die (because we won't stop needing refining until we die) – but I can guarantee you this: it's not nearly as painful, nor as long lasting as hell – which is exactly what He is trying to save you from.

He puts us through the fire so we can be refined. He hurts us so that we can get better, and by "get better" I mean we get to know Him better. We don't always understand the reasons why, just like Ezra didn't understand why I wouldn't save him in that ER, but just like I knew better than Ezra what was best for him, our Father knows better than us what we need, what will get us through this world of suffering to His side in heaven.

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It's one thing to know that God loves you, that God will get you through any suffering you face in this world, that nothing will be able to separate you from the love of Jesus, that God will do whatever it takes to get you to heaven by the sweat of his brow and blood of his Son, and it's something else altogether to experience those truths first hand – to experience that God can satisfy in ways nothing else can; to experience that God will never, ever leave you or forsake you

The memory is still fresh, it's still scary, it's still heartbreaking. But I can tell you today, that cross we carried was a beautiful cross. That fire we went through was a refining fire because Laura, Ezra, and I experienced firsthand not only how much we need God, but that we have him. We have all of him. And he will never, ever let us go.

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Amen.

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But just like that raw gold from the ground, that faith in your heart has all sorts of impurities mixed in with it. Right alongside that desire to know God better is a desire to sleep in on Sunday mornings or skip out on reading your Bible, or coming to a Bible class because you have other things you want to do. Right alongside that desire to love your spouse well, to be the best employee you can be, is a desire to love yourself. Right alongside that desire to find your real home and your real hope for the future in heaven with God is a desire to carve out a utopia, a little slice of comfort and hope in this world and in the things and people of this world.

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Yes, sometimes God's refining fires are unspeakably painful, and those fires, large and small alike will not stop until we die (because we won't stop needing refining until we die) – but I can guarantee you this: it's not nearly as painful, nor as long lasting as hell – which is exactly what He is trying to save you from.

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It's one thing to know that God loves you, that God will get you through any suffering you face in this world, that nothing will be able to separate you from the love of Jesus, that God will do whatever it takes to get you to heaven by the sweat of his brow and blood of his Son, and it's something else altogether to experience those truths first hand – to experience that God can satisfy in ways nothing else can; to experience that God will never, ever leave you or forsake you

The memory is still fresh, it's still scary, it's still heartbreaking. But I can tell you today, that cross we carried was a beautiful cross. That fire we went through was a refining fire because Laura, Ezra, and I experienced firsthand not only how much we need God, but that we have him. We have all of him. And he will never, ever let us go.

Remember friends, God's purpose in suffering: "**They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, 'They are my people,' and they will say, 'The LORD is our God.'**"

Amen.

The memory is still fresh, and still scary, and still heart breaking.

About four months ago we took our little Ezra to the emergency room at Children's Hospital. As most of you know, in the course of one weekend our 18 month boy lost all his motor function. It started with what looked like a balance issue. He would be sitting, start to tip over and not be able to catch himself. Eventually, he stopped talking, stopped eating, he stopped smiling... he couldn't even hold his head up any more... it was all just gone. He was just a shell of the bubbly, energetic kid we had known days earlier.

It was like a living nightmare for a parent.

It would be hard to pick my least favorite part of the whole experience, but definitely near the top would be the IV. It took seven different nurses, trying nine different times to get an IV successfully in place. Which meant nine different times I stood holding his hand, singing to him, talking to him while he looked at me and screamed. His eyes, full of wild fear and pain and tears, locked with mine – and even though the words weren't there, I knew what he was thinking, "Daddy, save me, pick me up, stop these people from doing this to me." It is hands down one of the most heartbreaking experiences of my life.

But I didn't pick him up. I didn't stop the nurses from forcing his arms and legs into awkward positions and stabbing him over and over and over. As he lay there, screaming on the top of his lungs, looking at me with panic and pain in his eyes, I didn't save him because even though every bone in my body wanted to stop them, even though he couldn't understand why, I knew that this was what he needed. He needed to endure this pain, he needed to walk through this fire so that he could get better. I let him be hurt that day because I knew better than he did what he needed at that moment. I let him be hurt because I am his father and I love him...

There is a Latin word for what Ezra, Laura, and I went through that day – a Latin word used by Martin Luther: *Tentatio*. There really isn't one English word that covers what *Tentatio* means. *Tentatio* is trials, struggles, temptation, suffering, affliction – simply put, it is any bad thing that happens to us in this life that tempts us to sin, or hurts us physically or emotionally. *Tentatio* is living at Children's Hospital for 19 days as your son suffers from some mysterious, undiagnosed illness. *Tentatio* covers everything from getting caught in a traffic jam to getting your car totaled in a multicar pileup, from losing your wallet to losing your job, from getting a cold to being diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease.

Tentatio is a word Martin Luther used to describe a truth he discovered in the Bible – a truth about how God operates in this world; a truth about how God goes about getting us to heaven; a truth we see in all three readings for today.

In Luke 9 Jesus said that if anyone would follow him to heaven he must carry a cross, he must lose his life – he must be willing to go through *Tentatio*.

Moses in Hebrews is held up as an example of saving faith because he willingly accepted that disgrace, danger, and suffering (aka *Tentatio*) was a necessary part of knowing and following God.

And in Zechariah, the basis for this sermon, God promises, "I will turn my hand against the little ones (the sheep, the followers of Jesus, us)... two-thirds will be stuck down and perish; yet one-third will be left... This third I will put into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold."

God's explicit promise for us today: I will make you suffer. I will make your life like walking through fire.

"Now wait just a minute," you may be thinking, "this is God's grand plan for getting us to heaven – making us suffer; filling our lives with *Tentatio*?"

If a part of you cringes at the thought of your God purposefully putting you through the fires of suffering in this world, I don't blame you. That cringing is a product of the world you have grown up in.

Think about how much time and money and brainpower our world has spent on *avoiding*, or at the very least *lessening*, affliction, pain, and suffering.

We go home to comfortably heated and cooled homes so we never have to be too cold or too hot. We wear comfortably fitted clothes with specially printed tags so that there is no chance for even the slightest irritation. We sleep in beds made just to our specifications so we don't wake up with back pain, under sheets with thread counts that would be the envy of the richest men in ages past.

We live in a world where discomfort and pain are unacceptable and often unnecessary – even childbirth can be rendered relatively pain-free because of the tireless pursuit of modern medicine to reduce and remove suffering.

We live in a world obsessed with avoiding suffering.

In a world like this, sitting here today, listening to God's promise to put you through *Tentatio*, affliction, hurt, suffering – this is about as countercultural as we could get.

And yet, here we are, listening to the promise of God: "I will turn my hand against the little ones... two-thirds will be stuck down and perish; yet one-third will be left... This third I will put into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold."

How is this okay? How could this possibly be in the plans of a good and loving God?

How could suffering be good? Well, it turns out that suffering is exactly what we need if we are going to get from this world to heaven, because it turns out that we are not all that different from metal.

When you pull a hunk of gold or silver from the ground, it is never pure gold or silver. It's usually a rock that has a vein of gold running through it, or a hunk of gold with a bunch of other metals and other non-valuable minerals mixed together with it. So what do miners do with that hunk of gold? They can't just wash out the impurities with a little dawn dish soap and elbow grease. They can't pick it out with teasers and a magnifying glass. They can't get the impurities out by taking a hammer and chisel to it. What do they do? They melt it. They stick it into a really hot fire to separate gold from non-gold, to

burn off any impurities that are mixed in with the gold – the process known as refining the gold.

God says his plan for us is kind of like that miner with his gold. God is the miner. We are the gold.

Right now we are not as we should be. God came to us and created in our hearts of stone veins of gold. He planted faith in our hearts, faith in Jesus as our Savior, faith that is genuinely beautiful and beyond value, faith that creates in our hearts a desire to be the kind of people God wants us to be.

But just like that raw gold from the ground, that faith in your heart has all sorts of impurities mixed in with it. Right alongside that desire to know God better is a desire to sleep in on Sunday mornings or skip out on reading your Bible, or coming to a Bible class because you have other things you want to do. Right alongside that desire to love your spouse well, to be the best employee you can be, is a desire to love yourself. Right alongside that desire to find your real home and your real hope for the future in heaven with God is a desire to carve out a utopia, a little slice of comfort and hope in this world and in the things and people of this world.

You are not as you should be. There are impurities mixed in with the gold.

And so God comes with fire, suffering, *Tentatio* because it's the only way those rocky impurities of our hearts can be burned away.

God comes with fire, suffering, *Tentatio* because suffering in this world forces us to come face to face with some refining realities: Namely, we need God. We need him way more than our impure hearts tend to realize.

We think that personal health can make us happy but when our health deteriorates, we come face to face with the reality that we were hoping our health would give us something only God can give us – true and lasting happiness.

We think that our families can give us hope and equip us to handle the future, but when our families die on us we come face to face with the reality that we were hoping our families would give us something only God can give us – hope and a future.

And on and on the list goes.

And so in love God puts us through the often painful process of idol smashing – burning away the impurities in our hearts that keep us from realizing just how much we need God and just how much he is offering us.

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