

Everything Happens for a Reason
Half-Truths: Things You Only Thought Were in the Bible, Part 7

Romans 8:28-39

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on July 2, 2017]3

I

Has anyone ever said to you, “Everything happens for a reason”?

I am certain that most of us,
perhaps even all of us,
have heard that statement from someone at some point.

And I am just as certain that most of us,
perhaps even all of us,
have said something similar to someone at some point.

Most of the time, we say these words in response to tragedy:
a sudden death,
a diagnosis of terminal illness,
a natural disaster.

Something bad has happened and we try to help someone through a difficult time.

So we say, “It was meant to be.”

Someone dies unexpectedly, and we hear someone say,
“It must have been their time,”
“It was part of the plan,”
or “It must have been God’s will.”

As we have done with the other sayings we have considered in this series,
I would like us to consider the question,
Is it possible that this saying,

“Everything happens for reason,”
 falls short of being the truth,
 the whole truth,
 and nothing but the truth?

II

Like so many of the half-truths we have considered,
 the person who says, “Everything happens for a reason,” means well.

These words are intended to provide a measure of comfort and consolation.

If we can’t explain a terrible event any other way,
 we can always try to make sense of it by saying God must have a particular
 purpose for bringing about—
 or at least allowing—
 situations in which people suffer and die.

We may assume that while we don’t yet understand why it had to happen, all
 events in our lives unfold according to God’s predetermined and immutable plan.

Since God is in charge of everything,
 whatever happens—
 a personal setback,
 an untimely death,
 a natural disaster—
 reflects the will and purpose of God.

If we extend this logic, we can arrive at some extremes that seem pretty silly:

“God meant for my team to win the World Series.”

“Honey, I’m sorry I forgot your birthday. It must have been the will of
 God.”

But then we move from the frivolous to some really troubling questions:

Why did God allow six million Jews to die in the Holocaust?

Did God really intend for 20 school children to die in the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting?

Was it God's will for the nine church members, including the pastor, at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston to die at the hands of a 23-year old white supremacist?

In 1984 the Rev. William Sloane Coffin, at that time the pastor of the Riverside Church in the City of New York, learned the horrible news that his 24-year-old son Alexander had been killed in an automobile accident when he drove his car into the waters of Boston Harbor and drowned.

Some dear woman trying to comfort Rev. Coffin said, "I just don't understand the will of God," at which he exploded:

"I'll say you don't, lady! Do you think it was the will of God that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper of his, that he was probably driving too fast in such a storm, that he probably had a couple of 'frosties' too many? Do you think it's God's will that there are no streetlights along that stretch of road, and no guardrail separating the road and Boston Harbor?"

Rev. Coffin went on to say that we need to move past the notion that God goes around the world with his finger on triggers, his fist around knives, and his hands on steering wheels.

To say everything happens for a reason is, at best, a half-truth that I would like all of us to remove from our list of things we say to comfort people when they are going through difficult times.

For there are several problems with the notion that God picks winners and losers in professional sports or the stock market,

let alone that car accidents,

criminal acts,

genocide,

or mass murder are all part of God's plan.

III

For one thing, saying that everything happens for a reason eliminates the concept of personal responsibility for our actions.

If everything happens according to God's immutable plan,
then whatever I do must be God's will.

God must have needed and wanted me to do it,
otherwise, God would not have let it happen.

If I cheat on my wife,
it must have been part of God's plan.

If my wife and children suffer as a result,
that, too, must be God's plan.

If I drink and drive and someone is killed as a result,
it must have been the victim's "time."

Yes, I did a terrible thing,
but God used that to accomplish some greater purpose.

The end result of such logic is that I cannot be held responsible for my actions,
since I was only doing what God willed me to do.

A second problem with the notion that everything happens for a reason is that it makes God responsible for everyone's actions.

If God actually intends for everything to happen,
then God is responsible for every terrible thing that happens in our world.

This would mean that tragedies do not happen in spite of God's will...
but because of it.

But if this way of thinking is true,
then every rape,
every murder,

every act of child abuse,
 every war,
 every terrible storm or earthquake that claims
 peoples' lives,
 every child that dies of starvation—
 all these are part of God's plan.

That is the awful truth that we must confront when we buy into the half-truth that everything happens for a divinely ordained reason.

A third problem with the notion that everything happens for a reason is that it leads to fatalism and indifference.

A fatalist thinks, "Whatever is going to happen, will happen...
 whatever will be, will be...
 we are powerless to change it."

If you are a committed fatalist, there is no reason ever to wear a seat belt—
 if you are meant to die in a car accident,
 you will.

If you are not meant to die,
 you won't.

If you take a fatalistic view,
 why work out,
 why eat healthy foods,
 or why take care of your body?

When it's your time, it's your time.

It won't matter how much you exercise,
 or whether you eat fried food seven days a week.

Diagnosed with cancer?

If you're a fatalist, don't waste time seeing an oncologist.

To seek treatment would be to resist God's will.

It was God, after all, who gave you the cancer in the first place.

In fact, the entire medical profession would seem to be working against God's purposes.

(Perhaps it is worth noting at this point the relationship between the words *fatal* and *fatalism*.)

Each of these options leads us to ask,
Is this really how things work?

Are we, in fact, not responsible for our actions?

Is God the Prime Mover behind all terrible, tragic events?

Is God calling us to be fatalists?

IV

Theologians speak of God's purposes and way of working in the world as the doctrine of *divine providence*.

Providence is a noun that is closely related to the verb *provide*.

The term typically refers to God's governance of the cosmos,
including our world and everything in it.

Christians believe that God superintends the universe and oversees what happens on our planet.

Closely linked to providence is another attribute of God: **divine sovereignty**.

The word *sovereignty* expresses the idea of authority or rule.

A sovereign depends on no one else for the power to rule.

The Christian faith affirm that God's authority encompasses all of creation.

Because God is the ultimate authority,
all power and honor,
all glory and dominion,
ultimately belong to God.

Though all Christians share a belief in God's providence and sovereignty,
you will find these concepts interpreted in different ways.

Some tend toward a view of God as micromanager,
intimately involved in every detail of the world's operation.

Others believe that God follows a hands-off approach,
like an absentee landlord who created everything,
and then stepped aside to let the world run itself.

This view is known as Deism, and some of our nation's Founding Fathers, notably Benjamin Franklin, were Deists.

A third view is what is called Process Theology—the view that the future is a range of options and God co-creates with humankind what the future will hold.

The truth is probably a mix of these views.

Our Reformed forebear John Calvin taught that absolutely everything happens by God's will and command—
a view sometimes called theological determinism.

In his classic *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Calvin wrote, “No wind ever rises or rages without [God's] special command.”

A corollary to this view is *predestination*—
the belief that God has predetermined everything that happens.

Life unfolds according to a script that God has written before any of us were born.

One of the implications of this belief is that God has predetermined, before we were born, whether we will accept his gift of salvation or be among the damned.

Some have called this “double predestination.”

A humorous take on predestination comes from a story of the Rev. Robert Lewis Dabney, a prominent 19th century Presbyterian minister, who was a chaplain in the Confederate army under the command of Stonewall Jackson.

(Rev. Dabney was also one of the leading apologists for slavery and white supremacy, but that’s a topic for another day.)

According to the story, Major Dabney always preached to Jackson’s men that the Almighty had already planned and predestined everything, and that if they were predestined to be struck and killed by a Yankee bullet, they could not possibly escape it.

But if they were not predestined to be killed or wounded by a Yankee bullet, then no Yankee bullet would harm them.

And so for that reason, he said, the soldiers could maintain absolute calmness in the midst of the fiercest battle.

One day when Major Dabney was visiting the front, a skirmish broke out. As Yankee bullets began to kick up dust around him, the major ran as fast as he could and jumped behind a tree.

A private had also taken refuge behind the tree, and he said to the chaplain, “Major Dabney, you don’t practice what you preach.”

“What do you mean, my good man?” said the Major.

The private replied,

“You’re always telling us that everything that’s going to happen has already been planned and predestined by the Almighty; that we can’t possibly escape our predestined fate; and for that reason we should always be calm in battle.

“I noticed, however, that as soon as the shooting started and bullets began to kick up dust around you, you immediately forgot about predestination, resorted to free will, undertook to save yourself, and ran and jumped behind this tree.”

Major Dabney explained,

“My good man, you don’t fully understand the doctrine of predestination. You overlook two significant factors. First, this tree was predestined to be here, and second, I was predestined to run and jump behind it.”

V

There is much more that could be said about these various ways of understanding how God works in the world, but to go into it any further would make this sermon far longer than you are willing to endure on a long holiday weekend.

So let me share with you an insightful commentary that comes from Peter Marty, the publisher of *The Christian Century*.

He writes in a recent issue about a 19-year old member of his congregation in Davenport, Iowa who had to be airlifted to a hospital after a hit-and-run driver plowed into his motorcycle.

When a family friend learned that the young man’s right leg would have to amputated, she phoned the young man’s mother to reassure her that this hardship was part of God’s plan for her son.

The mother was aghast, for this bit of folk wisdom went contrary to her own experience and faith.

Peter Marty writes:

“Wasn’t there more reason to fear rather than love a God this morally ambivalent or malevolent?”

“The quick answer would be yes. Interpreting God’s sovereignty to mean that God causes all circumstances to occur is a dangerous theological game to play. It turns people into passive subjects of a God who has a penchant for displaying power chaotically. Like marionettes dangling helplessly in thin air, we’d be forced to move through life while a stage-managing God yanks our strings whenever God pleases. Scripture doesn’t lend credence to this idea. Jesus never counsels people to accept their suffering as the Lord’s will. God may work in inscrutable ways, but there is no evidence that God works in nonsensical ways.”

Earlier I told you about William Sloane Coffin’s response to the woman who said she couldn’t understand the will of God.

Ten days after Alex’s death, Dr. Coffin returned to the pulpit of the Riverside Church and said:

“The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is, ‘It is the will of God.’ Never do we know enough to say that.

“My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God’s heart was the first of all our hearts to break.”

My friends, God is neither the micromanager of theological determinism, nor the absentee landlord of the Deists.

Both ideas are half-truths.

The deeper truth is the mystery of a God who is present with us in all of our sufferings,

whose heart breaks with our hearts,

and who promises that nothing in life or death will ever separate us from the love of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

VI

The Apostle Paul, on the way to Rome for his trial before the emperor, writes to the Christian community there:

“We know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose.” (8:28, CEB)

Many Christians know this verse by heart, but let’s take note of what Paul doesn’t say.

He doesn’t say that God makes everything happen for a reason.

He doesn’t say that whatever happens is part of God’s will and plan.

What he does say is that no matter what happens,
 however terrible or tragic it may be,
 God is at work to bring good for those who love him.

I do not believe that God gives people cancer.

I do not believe that God causes people to commit murder.

I do not believe that it is God’s will for someone to die in a car crash.

But even in these terrible events,
 God has a unique and mysterious way of bringing good out of tragedy
 when we place our trust in him.

When I look back on some of the most painful experiences in my life,
 I can see how God used them to bring about something good and beautiful.

In fact, the person I am today is largely the product of my most painful experiences
 and how God worked in me through them.

I daresay most of you could share a similar testimony.

And so Peter Marty concludes his column saying:

“How we bear our suffering can make all the difference in the world for how we live life, express faith, and avoid cheapening God. My 19-year-old friend...is already living his new one-legged life with great courage and hope. What he looks for now is God’s sustaining presence, not God as the cause of his suffering.”

The quote in the bulletin from Adam Hamilton helps us put it all in perspective:

I do not believe that God dictates our choices, as if we are mere puppets. Instead, God gave us a brain, a heart, a conscience, his Spirit, the Scriptures, and the ability to interpret them as guides to help us select the right path.

The right path means trusting in our good and gracious and loving God to give us both courage and hope in the midst of pain and loss, as we look to God’s sustaining presence.

**For there we will always find...
a love that will never let us go...
a love that will never let us down.**

Amen.

Sources:

Adam Hamilton, Half Truths: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn’t Say, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016, 17-48.

Loyal Jones, Ed., The Preacher Joke Book, Little Rock: August House, 1989, 45-46.

Peter W. Marty, “Not God’s Marionettes,” *The Christian Century*, June 21, 2017, 3.