



## Everything Happens for a Reason

### Galatians 6:1-10

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One of the things I love most about people of faith is our desire to offer love and care to others. There's a lot of good that will happen in the world if we are but able to share the love of God with everyone in it.

But try as hard as we might, there are times when we get it wrong. There are times in the midst of sharing God's love that we try too hard. What I have found among people trying too hard is that we don't know when to shut up. When things get awkward, or an exchange gets dense, or a conversation goes silent, instead of sharing authentically with each other in the awkward, dense, and silent moment, we feel the need to fill it with spoken platitudes and clichés. We pull words out of a hat that we hope will cut the tension and ease the pain.

The words we offer in these moments are usually respectable; they are well-meaning and good natured. The words we use are words we've heard before, and so they roll off our tongues with some public credibility. The words we speak are rationale – they make sense in our moments of brokenness and pain. But try as hard as we might to do good, I wonder if we've ever stopped to think about the meaning of the words we have to offer. Do the words come out with such ease that we never stop to question their authenticity and validity?

Over the next month, we're going to take a look at a few of the more commonly used Christian clichés. Our goal will be to consider whether or not such sayings are grounded in scripture or if they speak authentically regarding God's eternal will. If they don't pass muster, we'll consider what a more appropriate response may be according to the Biblical teaching. We start today with a cliché that even I have used when trying to offer comfort to others.

There are times in our lives when everything seems to be crumbling around us. Perhaps we're grieving over the death of a loved one, suffering through a difficult divorce or breakup, hurting because of work transitions, or burdened with more tasks to complete than we can reasonably be expected to finish. In these times, well-meaning and good intentioned faithful Christians have a tendency to offer hope and support by assuring us that what we're going through is part of God's divine plan, and we just have to bear with God's will amidst the pain. You may hear these words, "God wouldn't let this happen if it wasn't important for your growth," or maybe, "It's part of God's plan," or when someone dies, we say, "It must have been their time." All of these sayings stem from this one claim, "Everything happens for a reason."

The hope of offering such words is to encourage others by letting them know that their suffering is in some way under God's control; they are living within God's divine will, and that because it's God's will, God will help through it.

Perhaps underlying the claim that *everything happens for a reason*, there is a bit of physical truth. It could be argued that everything that happens is the result of something else, in a sense that all actions have consequences. But when well meaning Christians offer these antidotes of encouragement, we are rarely referring to any physical truths; we're generally speaking of Biblical truths. So we have to consider, are we really saying that everything that happens is the direct result of God's divine plan? Let's consider for a moment the breadth of what this would mean ...

For starters, saying God decides the results of every action would mean that God willed for the Atlanta Braves to get swept by the Nats last week. That may lead you to greater faith, but such a claim would be enough for me to consider searching for a new God.

Such a claim would also mean that God willed for such historical events as the Holocaust (where nearly 11 million people were killed), the black plague (in which an estimated 50 million people died), the Crusades (where nearly 1.7 million people died), or closer to home, 9-11 (where nearly 3,000 people were killed). Saying God wills and designs every action would mean God empowered the perpetrators and desired for the shootings at Columbine, Virginia Tech, and Sandy Hook. Do we think God designed for these children to be killed at such a young age?

This line of thinking is not as foreign as you may expect. In the 1500s, a Christian reformer named John Calvin wrote about a construct we call *Theological Determinism*. The idea behind *Theological Determinism* is that for God to be truly sovereign, for God to have the providence we proclaim, God must will and cause everything to happen. The concept is founded in some of the stories of our Biblical narrative. For example, in 1 Kings 17, the prophet Elijah announced that God was going to bring a great drought as part of God's judgment on the Israelites. Calvin's conclusion was that such stories in the Biblical text spoke about the nature of how God would work in the world *for all time*. Such a belief means that all weather patterns throughout the world, throughout history, are of God's purpose and plan. So, Hurricane Katrina was nothing more or less than God's punishment on the Big Easy, and the Haitian earthquake of 2010 was God's way of crushing an already hurting country. It would suggest that forecasters and weather personnel are prophets, foretelling of God's future action by predicting the weather patterns. And yes, there are people who believe Katrina was a God-mandated response for the sin of the New Orleans, just as there are people who believe 9-11 was a God-designed punishment on the corrupt financial practices of America represented in the Twin Towers.

When John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Movement, came along in the 1700s, he disagreed with Calvin's doctrine of *Theological Determinism*. Wesley suggested that such a doctrine removed all responsibility from God's created humanity. If God indeed decides what will happen and when it will happen, then we, as the created, are unable to do anything that God didn't plan. Such thinking would suggest that in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve didn't do anything wrong – they were simply living out God's determined actions. It would suggest that God's destruction of Sodom and Gommorah wasn't a response to the people's lack of faith,

but was instead just part of God's design. It would suggest no person can really do wrong, for we have no choice but to do as God has planned for us.

How does this relate to more current events? Saying everything that happens is God's will would suggest that God intended for over 400,000 Syrians to be killed in recent years. It would suggest that God wanted domestic abuse and child molestation to be present in our world. Saying everything is by God's design means saying God wanted there to be over 27 million people enslaved in the sex and labor trade around the world today. Saying that all actions are of God's design would suggest that God wanted our nation to revoke the environmental protection policies that were put in place to protect God's created world, that God wants people to lose their jobs because of cuts to governmental funding, and that God desires for the kind of political and national division that exists across our country and in the monumental city in our backyard. To be clear, I'm not convinced any of these are of God's design or will.

We may be trying to help by telling others they are under God's careful watch, and that their suffering is but part of God's divine plan, but suggesting someone's death is of God's meticulous planning opens up some terrifying and false notions of how God works in our world.

If the world isn't guided by Theological Determinism, if our actions are not pre-planned and decided for us by God, if *everything doesn't happen for a reason*, then how does God relate to us, and what is a more faithful response to offer family and friends who are suffering and hurting?

First, God's presence ...

Saying God isn't determining the way things happen doesn't lessen God's sovereignty for it doesn't imply God isn't present in the midst of our lives. God can remain omnipresent and omniscient (always present and all knowing) without being the one to decide the actions we will undertake. Saying God has knowledge of what will happen is quite different than saying God is commanding for it to happen.<sup>i</sup> God has created humanity with the capability of making decisions – for better or worse, we get to choose to do right or to do wrong. Like Adam and Eve, like King Saul and King David, like Peter and Judas, like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bashar al-Assad, like Mother Theresa and Adolf Hitler ... we get to choose our actions, for better or for worse.

That's not to say God doesn't exist amidst our decisions; most certainly we do believe God is in the midst of our choices and actions. John Wesley called it God's prevenient grace, the presence of God's love in our lives that yearns for *us* to join in *God's good work*. God's present grace makes it possible for us to respond to God's love and mercy through acts of love and mercy. "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."<sup>ii</sup>

Let me give you an example: I've been wearing an Apple watch for about 7 months. Every day the watch notifies at different times about getting up from my desk to take a walk. It reminds

me from time to time to stop and take a breath. I have an alarm that goes off every day at noon that reminds me to take time to pray. I have fitness data that tells me whether or not I'm exercising enough, walking enough, or burning enough calories. The watch isn't making me do any of these things (which is evident by the numbers on the scale!) – but it's there as a reminder of what I should be doing. So too does God work in our lives. We have been taught by the Scriptures what is right and what is wrong; we are reminded by the conscience of the Spirit when we are doing right and wrong; we are called to offer love in the same way God showed us love through Christ. But God isn't forcing us to follow such teachings; God isn't coercing us to do right or wrong.

Saying God is in control and that our actions are pre-determined by God is a rationale thought. God choosing our way makes sense, for God is an all-powerful Creator, and admittedly, God forcing our decision would help absolve us of struggle and guilt. But the Gospel isn't rationale. God does things and teaches things that make no sense to us – like sending Christ to the cross to offer salvation and eternal life for all. God knows it's irrational, and so we are told in Scripture, "God's ways are not your ways, God's thoughts are not your thoughts." So, what is the irrational reaction the Bible teaches should happen when we are seeking to help others in times of pain and suffering? Paul offers us some guidance in our scripture reading from the letter to the Galatians.

In verse 1, Paul writes, "If anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness." The word transgression comes from the Greek word παράπτωμα (par-ahp'-toe-mah). The word can mean sin, fault, offence, or transgression. The error can be willful or accidental in nature. In general, παράπτωμα (par-ahp'-toe-mah) refers to someone living in such a way that they are not in accordance with God's will.

While Paul is speaking about people who have done wrong, I would argue his text is also applicable in connection to people who are suffering and living through hardships. Not that people living through difficult times have done *any* wrong, but God desires for us abundant life, life without pain, life full of light and hope and joy. For any person to be suffering through grief, uncertainty, or hardship – to be living through a season of darkness is by definition a season where there is no light – and is thus not in accordance with what God wants for us.

In response to either case, a person living through a season of transgression or a person living through a season of hardship, Paul says our response should be to restore the person in a spirit of gentleness. Through offering a caring presence, we are to share with them God's grace and love, to restore in their life the light of Christ. He goes on in verse 3 to say, "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." We are instructed to join the other person in their pain. "It is only by carrying each other's burdens – by suffering and enduring each other – that we truly can become siblings, [brothers and sisters of Christ], to each other."<sup>iii</sup>

Paul says elsewhere in 1 Corinthians 12, what we need for shalom, that is, wholeness, for true community is a “profound mutuality where members have ‘the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.’”<sup>iv</sup>

Saying to someone else, “Everything happens for a reason,” is just a backhanded way of indicating, *I’m sorry your life is messed up right now, what a joy that God is caring for me more than God is caring for you.*

What if instead of offering this kind of retort that, while rationale in our modern day culture of self-aggrandizement and self-care, is devoid of God’s ultimate grace, instead offered the presence of our lives as we sit in the darkness of the valley *with* the other. What if we said, “I know this is a difficult time for you, I’m coming over to sit with you in this time of trouble.” Or “I’ve never personally lived through such pain, but I’m willing to be with you as a presence of God’s comfort and we can bear it together.” What if we put aside our agendas, calendars, and business long enough to offer more than a theologically lacking platitude, and instead picked up our cross and carried it; what if we were willing to give up our life for the life of another. That’s irrational; it doesn’t make sense in our stubborn society. But this is what God has proven gives life. God, in Christ, has proven that in the giving up of life, new life becomes possible. In the sacrificing of self-appreciation, offering life to others is possible. For the eternal will of God is not for people to suffer, or hurt, or wallow in the pain of grief and loss, but for all to share in the great joy of the empty tomb that promises new life and that promises the triumph of God’s love for everyone. So may you find the time to share in the pain of others, that together, we may all rejoice in the great love of the Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Adam Hamilton. *Half Truths: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn’t Say*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Nancy Elizabeth Bedford. *Galatians: Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016.

<sup>iv</sup> Charles B. Cousar. *Galatians: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982.