

Message Road Map

Series: *Half Truths*

Message: “Everything Happens for a Reason”

Deuteronomy 30:19-20

I invite you to take out the *lectio divina* sheet in your bulletin and flip it over. You’ll notice that there are daily scripture readings selected for the new series that we’re starting today called *Half Truths*. I encourage you to use these passages during your daily devotional time. In addition, we’re going to cover lots of content this morning, and to help you put it all together, I encourage you to take notes. As you may know by now, the purpose of this series is to look at phrases that Christians often repeat that seem true at first glance, but when examined more closely give us a sense that something isn’t quite right. It’s not that they don’t contain *any* truth, but that they only tell half the truth, which can lead to distortions that inadvertently cause harm.

Today, we look at the phrase, “Everything happens for a reason.” Has anyone said this to you? Have said it to other people? When often use this phrase when bad things happen and we’re trying to bring comfort to someone who is hurting. We don’t want people to think that their pain is meaningless or that God is absent, so we say, “Everything happens for a reason.” And there is a sense in which this saying is true, insofar as we live in a world of cause and effect. When I notice Emma getting upset with me, I know that there’s a reason. Maybe I bought another surfboard. You see, cause . . . and effect. But this is *not* usually what we mean when we say, “Everything happens for a reason.”

Rather, we mean something like, “It’s all part of God’s plan.” We assume that God has a plan for the whole world and everything in it, and even though we can’t completely understand this plan, if something bad happens, we are called to trust that it’s part of the plan, that it’s somehow God’s will. Initially, this can help us feel like everything is going to be ok because God is in control. But when we critically reflect on this idea, problems begin to arise.

When we say that everything happens for a reason because everything is part of God’s plan, it implies that whatever happens, happens because God *wants* it to happen. What else could we mean when we say that it’s *the will of God*, other than God wills it to happen, that God in some sense wants it to happen? But is it true that everything—*everything*—happens because God wants it to happen, even the horrible stuff, because it’s the outworking of some mysterious divine plan? And if we say, yes, what does this imply about God and human responsibility? As we begin to wrestle with these kinds of questions, I want to introduce you to Eric and Andy.

(Video Illustration)

As you can see, when this idea is played-out in our everyday lives, it can get silly. I was late to work today, but that’s ok because everything happens for a reason, or the Bucs won the super bowl because it was the will of God, or my car broke down and I had to buy a new one because it’s all a part of God’s plan. And when things get silly like this, people outside the church sometimes have a hard time taking us seriously. But when we start thinking about all the horrible things that happen to people around the world, what was once silly becomes very serious. In some circumstances, when we use phrases like, “Everything happens for a reason,” or “It must

be part of God's plan," to bring comfort, it might inadvertently cause more pain. It can make things worse. And there are at least three reasons for this.

First, this way of thinking can cause us to blame God for all the terrible things that happen in the world. Think about what it implies to say that everything happens for a reason when considering things like the holocaust or the war in Ukraine, or the suffering caused by wildfires in California and Maui, or the persecution of Christians around the world in places like Syria and Pakistan. Or think about what it implies about God when we consider all the murders and rapes that will happen around the world today, or all the children being severely abused right now as we worship. There is so much suffering in the world, and there seems to be something wrong with the idea that this is God's will, that in some sense God *wants* these horrible things to happen because they are the outworking of a bigger plan. There seems to be something cruel about telling a woman, "It was God's will that you were brutally assaulted," or to tell a parent, "It was God's will that your child was murdered," and then to go on and say, "Even though you can't see it right now, you just have to trust that it's part of a bigger plan." For some people, this makes God out to be a monster.

I don't know about you, but this is not the *heart* of God or the *will* of God I see revealed in Jesus. Based on what I read in the New Testament, and how I interpret it in the light of reason, tradition, and experience, I don't think it's *ever* God's will for someone to torture or kill another person. Rather, it's God's will that we NOT do things like this, and when we do, we're being *disobedient* to God's will. And I don't think it's ever part of God's plan to kill large groups of people or destroy entire communities with fires or other natural disasters. Rather, we live in a free world structured by natural laws, and sometimes when lightning strikes, or when winds follow certain patterns, or when ocean waters heat up, natural disasters occur. To say that God wants these things to happen or causes these things to happen, makes God responsible for all kinds of suffering and evil in the world, and some people would say, "If this is what your God is like, I'm off to find a different God." I personally know people who have left the church and turned away from the Christian faith because something horrible happened to them or a loved one and they thought that to be a Christian required them to accept that it was God's will, that somehow God was responsible, and they said, "I can't believe in a God like that."

A second way that these ideas can make things worse is how they can undermine personal responsibility. If everything happens for a reason, if everything is part of God's eternal will, then everything we do is because God wanted us to do it. But think about what this would imply about the nature of our actions. Looking back, is it ok that you cheated on your wife? Even though it was a horrible thing that traumatized her, should we say that it happened for a reason, that God put the desire in your heart and led you in that direction because it's part of His bigger plan—God's bigger plan for you, your wife, your children? And if it's part of God's plan, should we just move on as if nothing happened knowing that God will bring something good out of it? Or, in contrast, should we say that when you violated the holy covenant of marriage that you violated God's will and *thwarted* God's good plan for your wife and kids, that you need to take full responsibility and make amends, whether she stays with you or not? Or let's say that we see a terrible injustice happening in our community. Do we say, "Oh well, it must be part of God's plan," and then sit back and do nothing, or do we say, "This violates God's will, and we must unite and do something about it?" Saying that everything happens for a reason has a way of

getting us off the hook and making it less likely that we will take personal responsibility and do the hard work involved in change.

And the third way that these ideas can make things worse is that their logical conclusion leads to a kind of fatalism. It is a short step from saying, “Everything happens for a reason” to saying, “Whatever is going to happen is going to happen and there is nothing we can do about it.” So, if the date and manner of your death has already been determined by God as part of His divine plan, then it doesn’t matter if you wear a seatbelt while traveling in a car. It doesn’t matter if you eat healthily, work out, or take care of your body. Or if you are diagnosed with cancer, there is no reason to see an oncologist. In fact, if it’s part of God’s plan that you have cancer, going to an oncologist may be working against God’s will. If it’s God’s will that you live, you will live, and if it’s God’s will that you die, then you will die. There’s nothing you can do about it and there’s no reason to fight it with treatment. This fatalistic way of thinking calls the entire medical profession into question. Or think about politics. If we say that God has chosen a candidate and that it’s part of God’s will that this person be elected, then it’s going to happen whether we like it or not. There is no need to campaign or advocate for a particular person, no reason to even vote, because what will be will be, and we just need to accept that whoever wins as God’s choice. It’s part of the divine plan.

When we put all this together, it raises an important theological question: Is this *really* how God works in the world? And as we wrestle with this question, it takes us to the heart of two Christian doctrines regarding God’s sovereignty and God’s providence.

All Christians believe that God is sovereign, that God is the king of the universe, the ultimate authority who oversees the entire creation. All Christians also believe in God’s providence, that somehow God sustains us, provides for us, guides, and protects us. However, we do NOT all agree on exactly how God does these things. We differ on how to *interpret* God’s sovereignty and providence. Some Christians believe that everything happens because God tells it to happen or makes sure that it happens, essentially micromanaging the world. Others believe that God takes a hands-off approach. Like an absentee landlord, God creates everything and then leaves the creation to run entirely on its own. And other Christians believe something in the middle between these two extremes, that God is active but not in a controlling way.

One person who interpreted God’s sovereignty and providence to mean that God controls every event down to the last detail was the Reformer, John Calvin, who lived from 1509-1564. At the age of 27 he wrote an important book called, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, that laid out a systematic theology for the Reformed church. Calvin believed that God governs everything down to the smallest detail. When it came to the weather, he said, “No wind ever rises or rages without [God’s] special command.” In other words, it rains because God tells it to rain, and it snows because God tells it to snow. The idea that God controls the weather made sense to people in Calvin’s time, but today meteorologists give fairly accurate forecasts several days in advance. When they do this, are they predicting what God will do, or are they simply using the tools of modern science to predict cause and effect relationships in the natural world? Even more extreme was Calvin’s view that even the thoughts that pop into your mind happen because God puts them there. At the end of the day, Calvin believed that whatever happens, good or bad, is “fixed by God’s decree.”

One corollary to this interpretation of God's sovereignty is a Reformed doctrine of predestination. According to Calvin, no one chooses or rejects Christ on their own, because this is something that is predetermined by God. Before the creation of the world, God choose the people who would accept Christ and be saved. These are called the elect. If you are part of God's elect, God's grace is irresistible, and no matter what you do it's impossible for you ultimately to reject Christ and be damned. In contrast, those who God does not elect before the foundations of the world cannot be saved. No matter what you do, no matter how you live your life, it is impossible for you to ultimately accept Christ and be saved. So, who goes to heaven and who goes to hell –it's all been predetermined by the will of God.

Calvin's view is known as **theological determinism**, and many Christians reject this interpretation of God's sovereignty and providence. In fact, one of the biggest opponents of this view was the founder of the Methodist movement, John Welsey, who argued that this understanding is inconsistent with the God of love and justice that we see in the Bible.

While it's possible to cherry pick a few verses and interpret them out of context to defend this idea, it seems to contradict the overarching message of the Bible, that God created human beings with a mind to think and heart to feel and then set us free to make our own decisions, including the decisions to love God or reject God, to receive or deny God's grace in Jesus, to live in obedience to God or to live in disobedience to God. And these choices matter; they have consequences, for good or ill, not only for us but also for others and for God. This does not negate the fact that God is the king of the universe and is still ultimately in charge, that ultimately God's will *will* be done on earth as it is in heaven. But it does mean that God doesn't force us to do the right thing, and that we are responsible for our actions *and our impact*. This is clear in our primary scripture reading for this morning, taken from **Deuteronomy 30:19**:

“This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.” Moses is recorded as saying, God is giving you a choice. One path leads to life and the other path leads to death, and God wants you to choose life. This is a real choice with real consequences.

One implication is that we can't blame everything that happens on God by saying, “Everything happens for a reason.” Sometimes people make bad decisions and there's a terrible cost to that for them and others. And when we make sinful or evil decisions that result in real suffering, there is something that is not quite right to say that it's the will of God, because God doesn't want this. We can and do resist the will of God. We can and do engage in behaviors that thwart the will of God, and when we do this, we suffer and we cause others to suffer, and it's not God's fault.

At this point you might be thinking, “Well, if God is not pushing buttons and pulling levers, if God is not controlling outcomes like a puppet master, then is God doing anything in this world? And some people would say no, God is completely absent.

It may be surprising that many of the founders of America embraced a philosophy called Deism in which God creates the world according to a set of laws of nature and then then leaves creation to allow it to run entirely on its own. Here God is like an absentee landlord who takes a

completely hands-off approach. God isn't really involved in our world at all, at least not in the cause-and-effect ways that we typically observe. But if this is true, then God didn't set the Hebrews free from Egyptian slavery. God didn't send Jesus to show us the way, the truth, and the life. God doesn't give us the Holy spirit to speak to us, guide us, or lead us. But these are fundamental beliefs in the Christian faith. All of us believe that somehow God is working in and through the entirety of creation to bring us into loving relationship and abundant life. Again, where we disagree is in exactly how God does this. When we say that God is active in the world, we interpret this claim in different ways.

In fact, many Christians, especially those in the Wesleyan tradition, believe something in-between theological determinism and deism. We don't believe that God controls every detail of life, but we also don't believe that God is completely inactive. Rather, rather we believe that God works in and with the created world to lure us into knowing and doing God's will. It's like God is ahead of us, coaxing us forward, empowering, encouraging, and inspiring us to use our freedom, our hearts, souls, and minds, to make good choices, choices that move us toward life rather than death, choices that align us with God's will and God's plan. And we believe that God is powerful enough to ultimately accomplish His will on this earth as it is in heaven without controlling everything like a puppet master.

In other words, God calls us to love and trust Him so that we can surrender to His will. The God gives us eyes to see what He is doing all around us and empowers us to make choices that will help make his Kingdom visible in this world, his plan visible in this world. In my own experience, when I do this, God speaks to me, not with an audible voice but through what I describe as a tug on heart or a prompting in my mind. It's like the buzzing of the fitness app on my smart watch. Sometimes when I am sitting for long periods of time, writing a sermon or the church newsletter, my watch buzzes and tells me to stand up and walk around for one minute. Importantly, the watch can't make me get up and move. In fact, I often ignore it. It can only remind me to do something that I know is good for me. And this is how I experience God's working in my life. God doesn't force me but nudges me, reminds me. I don't always know for sure that it's God speaking to me or just a random idea popping into my head, but overtime I've gotten better at paying attention to these tugs and promptings. And when I act on them, I'm often surprised when looking back how God was working in and through me to accomplish something good, like helping someone. One time I felt a prompting to pray for my oldest son, and after praying for him I felt a nudge to send him a text. After I sent the message, he called me. He was having a hard time and needed someone to talk to, someone to mirror his feelings back to him and offer comfort. Now you might think, that's just a coincidence, something that happens all the time, but I believe that God loves my son and knew that my son needed to hear the voice of his father. And I believe that God nudged me, like the vibrations on my apple watch, and because I was paying attention and acted on the promptings, God was able to help my son through me, and help me in the process.

In my experience, this is how God usually works in the world. God teaches, guides, calls, empowers, inspires, prompts, and nudges us to move through life in accordance with his good and perfect will. When we pay attention and act accordingly it leads to a life of peace, love, and joy. However, God doesn't force us to do what he wants us to do. God doesn't control all the outcomes in the world or the details of my life. I have real choices, that have real consequences,

for which I'm really responsible. And this means that I can reject God's will and at least temporarily thwart God's plan for me and those around me with bad actions. This leads to suffering, death, and destruction. So, consider this meme that I saw on Facebook many years ago: "Everything happens for a reason. And sometimes that reason is you're just stupid and make bad decisions." We might also add, "Everything happens for a reason. And sometimes that reason is that other people are stupid and make bad decisions."

In closing, I want to share a powerful quote that I read in the book I'm using to prepare my messages, the book *Half Truths* by Adam Hamilton. I think it helps to clarify some important points.

"Suffering is not God's desire for us, but it occurs in the process of life, Suffering is not given to teach us something, but through it we may learn. Suffering is not given to punish us, but sometimes it is the consequences of our sin or poor judgement. Suffering does not occur because our faith is weak, but through it our faith may be strengthened. God does not depend on human suffering to achieve his purposes, but sometimes through suffering his purposes are achieved. Suffering can either destroy us, or it can add meaning to our life."

About 2000 years ago, the Apostle Paul wrote in **Romans 8:28**, "*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.*" This doesn't say that God *makes* bad things happen in your life to bring about some good. What it says is that whatever happens in your life, no matter how bad, God can find a way to bring you through and accomplish something good so that life is still worth living. In other words, God is in the business of redeeming suffering, and because of this, suffering, sin, evil, and death will not have the final word, something that we see in the resurrection of Jesus. And this is my experience, that God has used all the suffering I've endured, to make me who I am today, and I although I still struggle like you with many things, overall, I love my life and the person I continue to become. I don't believe that God caused the bad things that resulted in my suffering. Sometimes I caused the bad things to happen, and sometimes other people caused the bad things to happen, but in every situation God found a way to bring something good out of it. And maybe that's your experience too. If it is not, I want to tell you that it can be, it can be if you let Jesus lead your life.

I encourage you not to have an overly simplistic faith that leads you to say things like, "Everything happens for a reason," without carefully examining them. Because the day will come when you must walk through something really hard and you're going to find that this simplistic idea doesn't work anymore. And it helps to figure this out before that hard times arrive so that it doesn't undermine your faith and push you away from God, the only one who can help, the only one who can redeem your suffering and transform your pain.