

Text: [Deuteronomy 30:15-20](#)

Date: September 24, 2023

Title: “Half Truths: Everything Happens for a Reason”

Theme: When we offer comfort to people who are hurting, we want the things we say about God to be true.

1

“Everything happens for a reason.”

Most of us were raised on this saying

We’ve heard it a thousand times

Maybe even said it a thousand times

Today, like I said, at the start of worship

We’re starting a new series where we’re going to examine some common sayings and ask ourselves: is this really true?

I mean, biblically and theologically speaking

What do these phrases say about God?

What do they say about us?

We’ll find most of them have at least some biblical foundation

I suspect today’s is rooted in a verse from Romans 8:28 that will be familiar to many of you (CEB):

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.

“Everything happens for a reason” has a similar feel to “God works all things together for good,” doesn’t it?

And we’ll talk in a few minutes about how the two overlap –

because remember: we’re talking about HALF-truths

Things we say that are sorta true, but don’t tell the whole story

2

I don’t know if you’ve ever bristled when you’ve heard this saying directed at you

Maybe you couldn’t put your finger on why, exactly, it was troublesome

Or it could be you already know exactly where I’m going with this

Either way, I hope by the end of this message you’ll get why it can be a problem

I mean, “everything happens for a reason” certainly CAN be a source of comfort – IF we claim it for ourselves

>But usually we can only do that when these 3 things are true:

- 1) The situation is well in the rear-view mirror,
- 2) No one has been seriously hurt, and
- 3) Everything has worked out better than expected

At that point, it’s a statement of faith: a reflection of that Romans 8:28 verse: “All things work together for the good of those who love God”

But think for a second about when you MOST OFTEN hear it
Usually it’s from the lips of a well meaning person who WANTS to be helpful but has no idea what to say

In fact, they might be tempted to come out with it when one or more of the OPPOSITE conditions apply – namely:

- 1) You’re still going through the thing,
- 2) When you or people around you are suffering, and
- 3) It’s unclear whether everything is going to work out ok

Say it to someone then, and I GUARANTEE you’re going to hurt them
Think about it:

Maybe you just lost your job
Or you’ve been diagnosed with cancer
Perhaps there’s been a terrible car accident

Can I tell you something important about how to walk beside people in pain?

There are times when it is MUCH better to say nothing at all
Or simply to say, “That sounds awful. How can I help?”
Than to say something that’s going to hurt, or be untrue

Because there are moments, yes, when wise words can help someone get through something

But when circumstances are OBJECTIVELY awful – here’s the truth:
NOTHING YOU CAN SAY WILL MAKE THINGS BETTER
And especially not “Well, everything happens for a reason”

So, first – timing is important – you have to be past the thing
And second – the person *saying* it is important – you have to be saying it about YOUR OWN experience
No one should pronounce it over you

3

But are there other problems with “everything happens for a reason”?

Yes, and today’s scripture illustrates a significant one
Throughout the Bible, humanity is offered choices
Human agency and free will are assumed
God isn’t a puppet master pulling the strings to make us dance

We call that idea *determinism* – the belief that God is in control of everything, that God decides everything, that God has already determined the outcome

But determinism seems out of keeping with many passages of scripture – not all, but many

In the reading from Deuteronomy, Moses is summing up the law given to the people of Israel

And as he does that, he’s putting a choice before them:

“Today I’ve set before you life and what’s good versus death and what’s wrong.”

On one hand, choose life and health by following God’s ways
On the other, choose death and destruction by disobeying them
YOU decide how to live

And this is the predominant theology, especially of the Hebrew scriptures, the Old Testament

If you do right, good things happen
But if you don’t...watch out!

Which is, on some level, it’s own type of determinism
The notion that human effort 100% determines our outcome
That can lead to some hurtful theology too – like the belief that if something’s going wrong in your life, it MUST be your fault

That YOUR sin is to blame

Job is an entire book of the Bible dedicated to combating that idea
But that’s a message for a different day

Today's message is about why "everything happens for a reason" is only half-true

And it's only half-true because it discounts our ability to choose

In fact, our RESPONSIBILITY to choose

4

And make no mistake, we ARE responsible

We have a God-given mandate to care for each other

To watch over one another in love and kindness¹

That's why the words we use to comfort each other matter!

To fail at the work of kindness is to abdicate a responsibility that the Bible lays at our feet again and again, more times and in more ways than I can count

"Everything happens for a reason" takes that responsibility and kind of turns it on its head – laying it instead at God's feet

Which makes the saying hard to square with the difficult, even horrible things that happen in this world

Genocide

School shootings

Domestic violence

When people say, "EVERYTHING happens for a reason" I hope they don't mean THOSE things

Because the only REASON behind all these things are people's sinful and evil choices – NOT the plan or the will of God

Do you see now why this saying carries so much potential danger?

Because when you say it to a friend who is going through something awful, you're essentially telling them that their terrible situation "is what God wanted for you"

To which, any thinking person would say, "Well, if that's true, I'm out.

I don't need that kind of God in my life."

And they'd be justified in saying that

With just one phrase uttered at the wrong moment, we can potentially be robbing someone of their greatest source of support – their faith

We could be turning them away from God just at the time they need God the most

5

Look, the half-truth in this statement is a pretty potent one
The idea that God can make good, even great, things happen in our lives
even in the face of the most awful circumstances
I don't want to discount that idea because it's true – I've experienced it

Some of the most difficult things that have happened in my life have made
me the person I am

But let's be really honest: sometimes that difficulty and pain was self-
inflicted, it was because of things I did wrong

As the meme goes: "Everything happens for a reason.

Sometimes the reason is that you're stupid and you make bad decisions."²
Harsh, but true.

And then I think back to other times, when clearly my troubles arose
because of things others did to me

I can be grateful for where I am now, even through to go through them was
absolutely awful

>So I can say it – and believe it deep in my soul –
that God USED some of my most painful moments
Even moments of self-inflicted pain – for something good
And that's what we call redemption
That's what we call grace

>>But that's very different than me saying "God gave me that pain to make
something good come from it"³
Because if I believed that God INTENTIONALLY and PURPOSEFULLY put
me through some of those things, I honestly don't know that me and
God could ever be ok
God's grace-filled RESPONSE to our circumstances doesn't mean that
God PUT US in those circumstances

The eventual GOOD OUTCOME is NOT the REASON you found yourself
there

To say it is confuses CAUSE and EFFECT

God's gracious ability to bless us is an EFFECT – it's not a CAUSE

So, if I had to rate it, I'd say "everything happens for a reason" is maybe something a little less than a half-truth, maybe like three-eighths? Because while it leans toward a biblical truth, that God works good in bad circumstances,
We often use it so carelessly that it hurts more than it helps
And it lets us off the hook for choices that are ours to make
While inadvertently pinning the blame on God for all that's wrong with the world

It's important that we speak the truth about God to one another
At least to the limits of our ability
Especially in moments when we see another person hurting
Because that IS our responsibility – very clearly

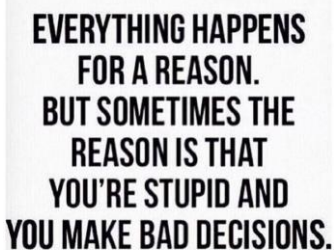
Today, God has set before us life and death, blessings and curses
Today, we choose to bless each other with words that are true
With words that lead toward life

Amen.

By Joe Monahan, Medford UMC, Medford NJ

For further reading: this series is based on Adam Hamilton's book *Half-Truths: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn't Say* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2016).

¹ Read, for example, Romans chapter 12.



**EVERYTHING HAPPENS
FOR A REASON.
BUT SOMETIMES THE
REASON IS THAT
YOU'RE STUPID AND
YOU MAKE BAD DECISIONS.**

²

³ There's an interesting theological parallel in Romans 6:1-2a, where Paul mocks those who want to abuse God's penchant for creating good from evil. He says, "What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may increase? By no means!" It seems that by using this phraseology, he's probably echoing what some in the community were actually saying.