

**DID GOD REALLY SAY:
EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR A REASON?**

Sermon written by Martha-Jean Fitch

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TEXT: Romans 8:18-28

PRAYER: Lord, we dedicate this time of worship to you. Open our ears that we may hear You speaking to us. Open our hearts that we might know Your presence and promise in a powerful way. And God may my words be Your words – and may You receive the glory and honor for all that is said and heard - O God our Strength and our Redeemer. AMEN

MESSAGE:

Today we continue our series, “Did God Really Say?” We are looking at those sayings or phrases that we sometimes say that sound like they are from the Bible – and are not. Or phrases that capture part of the truth of Scripture but can easily miss the whole truth and promise of the text. I’m guessing that we have all said some of these phrases from time to time.

Much as I did back a month ago when we began our sermon series – I want to begin today by seeing if you can identify whether or not some quotations are from the Bible or not. We’ll just look at a few. Here we go:

1. It is more blessed to give than to receive. Yes - this is a quote of Jesus found in Acts 20:35 – but no where in the Gospels!
2. A penny saved is a penny earned. No – this is from Poor Richard’s Almanac by Benjamin Franklin. But Proverbs 13:11 does say something about gathering money little by little that will make it grow.
3. Pride goes before a fall. Yes. Proverbs 16:18 – “Pride goes before destruction and haughtiness before a fall.”
4. Go the extra mile. Yes. Jesus said in Matthew 5:41 – “If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles”. Make the extra effort to help someone.
5. Lend me your ears. No. This is a quote from Marc Anthony in Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar. But it could be somewhat connected to the phrase Jesus said a lot, “He who has ears, let him hear.” – Matthew 11:15
6. Turn the other cheek. Yes. Jesus says this in the sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:39.
7. I escaped by the skin of my teeth. Yes. Job 19:20.
8. Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise. No. Benjamin Franklin was the one to give this advice.¹
- 9.

Now – one more – “Everything happens for a reason”. No. That phrase is not in the Bible. Some have attributed this to a philosophical statement of Aristotle. The Bible does say “For everything there is a season” and in other places we can see God has a purpose and a plan. But no where does it specifically say, “Everything happens for a reason”.

How many of you have ever had someone say this to you? Have you ever said this phrase? I think probably all have at some point in our lives. And what do we mean when we say, “Everything happens for a reason”? Sometimes I think we are saying that to describe how God has worked in our lives – causing something good to happen. Maybe it is one of those times we see things that God turning something bad into something good.

For example, one time I went to visit a woman named Harriet in the nursing home. When I got to her room, she was asleep and I didn’t want to wake her. So, I got my pen out of my wallet and wrote a note for her and left it on her nightstand and left. As I got out to the car, I realized that I accidentally left my wallet there! So, I had to go back! When I arrived at her room to retrieve the wallet, I discovered that Harriet was awake and we were able to have a wonderful visit together. When I was about to leave, we talked once again about me leaving my wallet and coming back a second time, which enabled me to visit with her. To which Harriet responded, “Well, that was supposed to happen. You know everything happens for a reason.”

Sometimes we can see things like that happening and can see “coincidences” or “God- incidences” where we see God at work. Like when you are running late for an appointment, and you make all the lights and you even find a parking spot near the building. I always say, “Thank you God!” Or maybe, you get delayed by a red light – only to witness an accident up ahead that might have been you. “Thank You God for that red light!” Everything happens for a reason we determine. But does it? Can we really say that about EVERYTHING?

You know, it seems that phrase is most often used – instead of looking for the good - when something bad has happened and we are trying to help someone through a difficult time. When someone dies unexpectedly, we hear words like: “Well, it was part of the plan – it just must have been their time – everything happens for a reason.” We decide that since God is in charge of everything –whatever happens must reflect the plans and purposes of God.

Some do believe that God is a micromanager and determines everything we do in life. It has been said, from theologians like John Calvin, that God has predestined and predetermined everything that happens – that life as we see it is just a script that God had written before any of us were born.

But think about what that means when you say everything is a part of God’s will and plan. That produces a lot of troubling questions.

Was it really a God’s plan that 2 planes would fly into the World Trade Towers, killing almost 3,000 people....because everything happens for a reason?

Does God really want little children to die in a school shooting – and that some 6 million children die in starvation every year?

Is God responsible for every bad thing that happens in the world? All the murders and rapes, the child abuse and the human trafficking, every earthquake and hurricane. Does God just write that into our script – and cause that to happen for some God ordained reason?

This week, I read a story about something that happened in Dallas, Texas last summer. An 8-year-old boy was playing with his 5 year old brother in their home. The 8-year-old found a hand-gun in their home and mistaking it for a toy, pointed the gun and shot his 5 year old brother and killed him. What a terrible tragedy! When the news reporters in Dallas were reporting on the story, apparently someone who was trying to bring some comfort and make sense out of this tragedy, said into the camera, “Well you know there’s a reason for everything.”²⁶

Really? Did God cause this to happen or was this just a senseless tragedy?

Or think about the recent shootings that have been in the news – in Uvalde and Highland Park, among others. Think about those families, planning funerals for their young children whose lives were horrifically cut short. Do you think it would be of comfort to say to them, “Everything happens for a reason, this was part of God’s plan”? I think it would do more harm than good. I believe it would turn people away from God – making Him out to be heartless and sadistic.

I don’t believe God is behind evil acts. I don’t believe a good and loving God would have that in His plans. God is not responsible for every terrible thing that happens in our world.

I think that many bad things happen because we live in a fallen and broken world. And also – God has given us free will and people can either choose to make good choices and live obedient lives, walking in the Spirit – or they can choose to turn away from God and end up making choices that hurt themselves or others. And we know that Satan is at work in the world as well – causing bad things to happen. Jesus said that the “thief comes to kill and steal and destroy”. (John 10:10) And I Peter 5:13 tells us that the enemy prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to destroy.” All of these factors play into the many reasons bad things happen in our world.

But the good news is that God has given us His Son – who came to give us life and give it abundantly! He is our Redeemer and wants to be involved in our lives and work to bring good out of bad. Just as God redeemed the worst day of all – the Friday Jesus was crucified on the cross – and gave victory through the resurrection of Jesus on Easter --- God can redeem and bring victory to us. God never wants to let evil and death to have the final word. But will work to bring some good out of it.

We learn this from our passage for today from Romans 8. I believe that this is the passage that people often misinterpret, believing that God causes *all* things to happen. But if we look closely at the text, we will see that is not the case. Open your Bibles up to Romans 8 and let’s read together verses 26-28.

²⁶ In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. ²⁷ And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.

²⁸ *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

As a believer, we have not been left alone to cope with the problems and pain in life. We have been given the Holy Spirit to help us through our weaknesses – to be with us forever and intercede for us. And as Adam Hamilton says in his book, *Half Truths*, “(Notice the Apostle Paul) doesn’t say that God makes everything happen for a reason, or that whatever happens was part of God’s will and plan. (nor for that matter does he say that everything that happens to us is good). Rather he says that no matter what happens, however bad it may be, God will somehow bring good out of the situation for those who love Him. God will force evil to accomplish good.”³

Really, one of the most important words in that passage is the word “in”. It doesn’t say that God causes everything – but that “in” everything that happens, God works for the good. Not everything that happens is good – but God is able to work in everything to make good happen.

Adam Hamilton goes on to describe it this way: “As Christians, we recognize that sometimes horrible things happen. They are part of life. But we also recognize that horrible things will never have the final word. Ultimately they become part of our journey that finally reaches its end in God’s eternal kingdom. That’s what Jesus’ resurrection shows us. Death is not the end. Love outlasts it all. God has the final word.”⁴

God doesn’t promise us a problem free life – but rather says in this life we will have trials and trouble. But He has overcome the world (John 16:33). He will carry us through those times of trouble and will even work to bring about His good and hopeful plans for us. And the promise is that “nothing can ever separate us from God’s love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God’s love. ³⁹ No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38-39).

Dallas Willard paraphrases Paul by saying that “for the one in God’s hands, nothing irredeemable can happen to you. That promise we can count on.”⁵ God will always be there for you – and His love cannot be separated from you – and He can redeem all that we go through.

So – when we talk with someone who is going through a very difficult situation or is facing a tragedy or death – instead of saying “Everything happens for a reason”, which can lead a person to think that God had a plan for this bad thing to happen. Instead, how about saying, “God is with you!” No matter what circumstance you are in, God is with you and He will help you. Life may never be the same, but life can still be good because God is at work in it to redeem and bring about good. God is holding you and will carry you through.

PRAYER

Let me close with sharing a prayer from Sarah Young's book, entitled *Jesus Listens*. It just seemed to be a fitting prayer for our hearts as we think about struggles in this world – and how God is at work in them all to bring good.

So, let us pray:

Cherished Jesus, this world abounds with negative things for me to think about. Sometimes problems mine and others seem to shout for my attention. The difficulties can occupy more and more of my thinking, causing me to grow weary and lose heart. When this happens, please remind me that I can choose the subject of my thoughts. Instead of wallowing in the darkness of discouragement. I can turn toward you and let Your light shine upon me.

Help me not to be defeated by wrong choices I have made in the past and don't let me define who I am now on the basis of past decisions that were hurtful. Each moment provides a fresh opportunity to draw near to You and enjoy Your presence. Even when I'm struggling, I can choose to seek You in the midst of my problems, instead of just focusing on the difficulties. I love hearing Your words of encouragement: "In Me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart I have overcome the world." In your triumphant name, Amen⁶¹

INVITATION

RESOURCES

¹Rev. John M. Young, "Does the Bible Really Say That?"

<https://unite-production.s3.amazonaws.com/tenants/lwml/attachments/22068/bible-study-does-the-bible-really-say-that.pdf>

²Dr. Clayton Oliphint, "Does Everything Happen for a Reason?", October 31, 2021.

<https://youtu.be/RvpVEVBrzd4>

³Adam Hamilton, *Half Truths*. Abingdon Press, 2016. Page 43.

⁴Ibid. Page 44.

⁵Philip Yancey, quoting Dallas Willard on the Bible Gateway site interview.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/blog/2021/05/the-shock-and-scandal-of-gods-grace-an-interview-with-philip-yancey/>

⁶Sarah Young, *Jesus Listens*. August 10 devotional on page 233. Thomas Nelson Publishing, 2021.