

# Everything Happens For A Reason?

1/3/2016

## Deuteronomy 30:19-20a

In this month's sermon series we're going to be considering things that Christians often say, things they believe, that may not be entirely true. They sound right and often can be supported by some scripture. But under careful examination they are found to be, at best, half-truths.

We begin with a statement that most of us have heard, and many of us have said: "Everything happens for a reason." If we mean that we live in a world of cause and effect, then this is true. But usually we say it when something bad has happened to someone and we seek to console by assuring them that God has a reason for bringing about, or allowing, the suffering....

I think "Everything Happens for a Reason" is at best a half-truth. So I offer three problems with this idea:

### A. It Removes Personal Responsibility

The first problem with this is that it removes personal responsibility. If everything happens for a reason, and that reason is that God has a plan, then whatever happens, by virtue of the fact that it happens, must be the will of God. I cannot be held responsible for my actions; I was only doing what I was supposed to do. If I cheat on my spouse — "everything happens for a reason." If I text while I drive and someone is killed, it must have been the victims "time." Of course I did this terrible thing, but it was God who put me up to it to accomplish some greater purpose. I was only doing what God planned that I do.

A second problem with this idea is:

B. It Makes God Responsible for Our Errors, Mistakes and Sins

Closely linked to this is that if everything happens for a reason, then ultimately God willed and caused each thing to happen. Let's test this out based upon the news stories of the last week.

This week in Chicago police responded to a call for help with a mentally ill person and fatally shot that person and an innocent downstairs neighbor. Was this God's plan? Winter storms tore through the country leaving more than 40 people dead. Did God cause this to happen to fulfill some part of his plan? Did each one of those people need to die right then as part of some great master plan? A man kills his wife, three teenaged children, and then himself in Minnetonka. Was this also part of God's will? Was it their time?

Every rape, every murder, every act of child abuse, every war, every terrible storm or earthquake that claim the lives of people, every child that dies of starvation, happened all because God planned it and willed it?

And the final problem is:

C. It Leads to Fatalism and Indifference

If we really believe that everything happens for a reason, that whatever happens is a part of God's plan, this leads to fatalism and indifference. Fatalism says we are powerless to change what happens in life, so why even try. Whatever will be will be.

There is no reason to wear a seatbelt—if you are meant to die in a car accident you will. If you are not, you won't. Why work out and take care of your body? After all, when it's your time, it's your time. Diagnosed with cancer? Don't dare see an oncologist and consider treatment—you are resisting God's will. In fact, the entire medical profession, far from being God's instruments of healing, would seem to be working against God's plans.

Consider this when it comes to politics or sports. Don't like your Congressperson? Better not work against them—they must have been God's choice. Don't like Congress's laws, or the President's policies? Listen, they must be the will of God. And think of the upcoming Super Bowl. Why would either team need to practice, memorize plays, or work hard preparing for the game? After all, the game's outcome has already been predetermined, it is part of God's plan, and there is no changing it. You get the idea....

Christians believe in God's providence or that God provides, and God's sovereignty—that God is the highest authority. All power, glory and dominion ultimately belong to God. But let's think about two common, but very different ways Christians see how God exercises his rule.

John Calvin was a brilliant lawyer, theologian and pastor who lived from 1509 to 1564. He was one of the most important figures in the Protestant Reformation. He wrote his most influential work, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, when he was just 27. He was writing in response to medieval Catholicism, and he outlined Protestant theology as he conceived it. Calvin's view of God's authority, dominion and providence was such that he believed that everything happens by God's will and command. He writes in the *Institutes*, "No wind ever rises or rages without [God's] special command." So every storm, all the daily weather, is decreed by God. Calvin believed, as did some in the Bible, that people have children or remain barren, not for some physiological reason, but because of the hand and will of God. He believed that God governs the very thoughts of your heart so that while you might think you've had an original idea, God really placed the idea in your mind.

For Calvin, everything that happens, good or bad, is “fixed by [God’s] decree.” One corollary to this, which Calvin is known for, is believing that God has predetermined that some are elect and will be saved, and some are damned and will spend eternity in hell. God is sovereign and determined this before the elect or damned were even born. This view is at times also known as THEOLOGICAL DETERMINISM.

There are many things I appreciate in Calvin, but this element of his teaching is not among them....John Wesley and most of the early Methodists rejected this view, as have many other Christians, basically saying, “this just isn’t right”. They found this idea that God damned persons to eternal suffering before they were born inconsistent with God’s attributes of justice, mercy, and love.

Calvin could claim some scriptural support for his view. Some of the biblical authors clearly saw the world in these terms. Yet I believe the strongest image in scripture is that God governs creation not as a micromanager who manages every tiny detail, but as one who gives people a mind to think with, a heart to feel with and gives them freedom and empowers them to make their own choices, even if at times they make the wrong decision.

In Genesis 1:28 God says, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” God gives us responsibility for what happens on earth – is God still in charge? Of course, God has ultimate dominion, but we can’t blame God for our choices or what happens because of those choices – good or bad, we have been given responsibility to exercise dominion of the world on God’s behalf.

Throughout scripture God lays out the right path and warns of pursuing the wrong path. We see this in the passage we have today from Deuteronomy where Moses has just recited the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Law. Notice what Moses says next as he implores the Israelites: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days.” If people were simply going to do whatever God put on their heart to do, what was the point of this powerful and compelling challenge? The Israelites have a very real choice. They can obey God, hold fast to him and love him and find life. Or they can turn away and find death. Why call them to choose if in fact they cannot choose? Because God gave us freewill – the ability to choose right or wrong, the privilege of choosing for ourselves things that lead to life or things that lead to pain and even death for ourselves and others.

On the opposite end of the theological spectrum is a theological philosophy popular in 18th century, particularly among some of our nation’s founders called Deism. Deism in its popular form held that God created all things, set the laws of nature in motion, gave humanity dominion over the earth, then stepped away. The challenge with deism is that it makes no room for God to be at work in our world at all. It excludes the idea that God freed the Israelite slaves from Egypt. It excludes that God speaks through Scripture. It means God did not send Jesus to show us the way, the truth and the life or to save us from ourselves. It means God does not guide us by his Spirit, does not in any way direct anything on earth. Christianity asserts that God does seek to influence us, God did send Jesus to save and deliver us. God is actively at work in our world, it’s just that God doesn’t force things to happen; God works in us and through us. And God does, on rare occasions and for reasons we may not fully understand, intervene in the affairs of this world in miraculous ways.

Determinism and Deism offer two very different pictures of God's providence and sovereignty. In the first God is a micromanager, in the second God is an absentee landlord. I think the truth is somewhere between the two....

Here's a quote shared by Rev. Ray Firestone about suffering: "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 consequence 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."

So there is one last thing I'll mention that God does. It is captured in an oft quoted passage from Paul's letter to the Romans: "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." What that doesn't say is that God makes everything happen for a reason, nor that whatever happens was God's will and a part of God's plan. It says that whatever happens God will somehow bring good from it for those who love him. He will force even evil to accomplish good. The good times and bad, the times of great joy and terrible pain, do not happen because God wills them, but God will use them, and they ultimately become a part of our journey that finally reaches its destiny in God's eternal kingdom....

Between the picture of the micromanaging God who causes everything to happen and the absentee landlord God who is not involved in our lives or world, is a picture of God who grants human beings freedom, and allows them to take risks; sometimes our freedom comes into conflict with the laws of nature, or brings pain to us or other people. Our world is a place where tragedy is not caused by God, but God walks with us through the hell that sometimes happens on earth. God promises never to leave us or forsake us. God can directly and supernaturally intervene, but usually works indirectly through people; and where we have the assurance that, in the end, tragedy does not have the final word, but that God will work all things toward the good, this is our hope as Christians.

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**New Revised Standard Version**

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