

That's Not in the Bible Sermon Series
#1 – Everything Happens for a Reason
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“Everything happens for a reason.” “God won’t give you more than you can handle.” “God has a plan for you.” Have you ever said one of these? I know I have. In many cases, these words and other spiritual sayings can be great sources of comfort to people during difficult times. But that’s not always the case. In our sermon series starting today, we want to take a closer look at the Christian clichés that come easily to our lips when we’re confronted with a crisis or put in an awkward situation.

I’m not expecting us to conclude it’s wrong to say these things. In many cases, these words can be very soothing. But it’s important for us to ask why we say them. I believe they are often said, not to offer comfort, but to provide some sort of explanation when there really is no explanation. There are two things we human beings don’t particularly like: silence and mystery. And we really can’t stand a mysterious silence! So when we’re faced with a situation that has no logical explanation, we will quell the mystery and shatter the silence by saying something that we think will be helpful, probably because someone once said it to us. When we simply don’t know how to respond, we lean on these Christian truisms, which one author called “spiritual urban legends.” That same author said, “Sometimes we treat the Bible as if it’s a series of sound bites and little sayings that we can put on T-shirts, coffee cups, and posters. But it’s a big book.”

I believe when we use a Christian cliché, we are hoping to accomplish two things. First it provides an answer to the mystery that has confronted us, no matter how misguided or theologically inadequate that answer may be. And second, it provides us a way out of the conversation. When someone tells us that they were just diagnosed with cancer, it’s a bit of a conversation stopper. So we respond as we have learned, with a saying that we think conveys care and concern and some vague sense of spirituality, like “Don’t worry, God doesn’t give us more than we can handle.” Then we give the person a hug and leave. The problem is, we may have done more harm than good.

We think that these sayings make the other person feel better. But in many cases, they don’t. Instead, they make us feel better because we’ve done something in a situation where there’s really nothing we can do. We don’t like to feel helpless or out of control. So, instead of sitting with the person in their pain and despair, which is a really hard thing to do but may be exactly what the person needs, we speak into the mysterious silence words that we think convey hope. And then we walk away.

Let’s start today with one of the most common Christian clichés: Everything happens for a reason. I heard the story about a pastor making a hospital visit one day. When he got to the patient’s room, they were asleep, so he set down his keys to write them an encouraging note. He left the note on their bedside tray and made his way back to the car, only to find he had left his keys in the patient’s room. He trudged back into the hospital and up to the room to retrieve his keys. When he walked in, the formerly sleeping patient was now awake and they had a wonderful visit together. As the pastor was leaving, he told the patient about leaving his keys and coming back to the room a second time, to which the patient responded, “Well, everything happens for a reason!”

When something fortuitous happens like that, we often look for a deeper meaning. You’re running late for a meeting and parking spot opens up right next to the door of the

building. You get caught by a red light, only to witness an accident up ahead that might have involved you. You didn't quite finish your homework over the weekend, and then wake up Monday morning to a snow day. Hallelujah! Everything happens for a reason! Or does it?

At the last church I served, there was a little girl named Emma Short. Emma had Down's Syndrome and was one of the bright lights in our congregation. She loved to sing and play and the congregation loved to love on her. I got a call the night before Thanksgiving one year that Emma had been taken to the emergency room. Doctors eventually found a massive brain tumor, and Emma died a few days later. A few minutes after she died, her parents called me into Emma's room as they held her body and asked me to say a prayer. Do you think I should have said to them, "Well, everything happens for a reason?"

Of course not. Can we agree that some things happen for a reason, but other things happen for no reason? Sure, there may be a meteorological explanation for a hurricane or a medical explanation for a brain tumor, but there's no reason for them, there's nothing we can say that will explain thy "why" behind such tragic events. But sometimes, when we are faced with the magnitude of someone's grief or the enormity of bad news, we just don't have anything to say. So we say, "Everything happens for a reason," hoping that provides some sort of comfort.

But here's the thing. That's not in the Bible. And here's another thing. It's not even spiritual. It's more mystical, pointing toward something greater than our understanding. But if you think about it, the statement doesn't say anything. Why did it happen? Who made it happen? What's the reason behind it? It's the quasi-spiritual version of saying, "Oh well..." or "It must be God's will."

The implication of the statement is that God is behind the event and God has a reason for this event happening. That makes perfect sense when the outcome of the situation is good, like a pastor getting to spend quality time with a parishioner after forgetting his keys. But when this statement is applied to a tragic situation, it paints God into a logically indefensible corner. If everything happens for a reason, and God is somehow behind that reason, then God has a lot of explaining to do to Emma's parents and to all of us who've experienced tragedy and loss.

I think I know how this scapegoating of God happened and it starts with Romans 8:28. Here's a great example of where translation plays a crucial role in our understanding of God's word. The first authorized English translation of the Bible, the King James Version, renders the verse this way: "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God." This can be interpreted that all things, good and bad, happen for a reason – for the good of them that love God. Since this was the only English Bible for about 400 years, this way of understanding God's work came to be authoritative.

We can see how this line of thinking was picked up in subsequent translations. The NRSV, which we use in worship, reads very similarly to the King James: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God." Now listen to how the NLT translation makes God's role even clearer: "And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God." In this translation, God's role in all things that happen, good and bad, is that God causes them. It's a short step from this verse to "Everything happens for a reason."

But let me offer an alternative translation. The NIV says it this way: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him." The difference can be found in one little preposition, two tiny letters: in. There's a Grand Canyon of difference between all things working together and God working in all things. The NIV version says that no matter what happens, good or bad, explainable or unexplainable, God is at work in them. God is working

through even the most tragic situations to bring about good. The semantic difference is small, but the theological difference is enormous.

For example, after Emma died, her parents established a fund in her name for the church to use for any music-related needs. We used that money to buy children's music and to upgrade instruments, and it was a huge blessing to us. Now, did God cause Emma to die so the church could get that fund? You see how ridiculous that sounds. Or did God work through the tragedy of Emma's death and her parents' grief to create that fund as a way for Emma's legacy to continue?

The problem with saying "Everything happens for a reason" is that the word "everything" is all-encompassing, covering everything from well-timed snow days to killer tornadoes. But what kind of God would open up parking spaces for someone who's running late but not stop planes from flying into buildings? That's not the kind of God I want to worship. When we say this line in the face of a crisis or tragic situation, we are ascribing to God a causal role that paints God as a capricious, finicky deity who has the power to control everything but chooses not to do so.

So what do you say when faced with these kinds of situations? When we feel like we have to say something, what can we offer? First of all, sometimes the best thing you can do is be quiet. As one writer said, "When you have nothing to say, say nothing." As hard as it is, sit with the other person in their pain. Offer a hand to hold. Listen to what they are saying. You'll learn more about how to care for the other person by simply being present with them.

If you absolutely have to say something, think about it first. I honestly don't remember what I prayed with Emma's parents that day, but I do remember saying, "God is with you." That's what Romans 8:28 says, at least in the NIV translation. No matter what circumstance you are in, God is with you. No matter how you got there, be it a failing body or your own boneheaded choices, God is with you. No matter what the outcome will be, God is with you. That's the role of grace in the midst of our tragedies. Life may never be the same, but life can still be good. God is at work to help make that so.

Life is hard. Stuff happens. I know that's not very pastoral of me to say, but it's true, isn't it? Sometimes things happen for no good reason, and blaming God as a way of explaining it only makes matters worse. Instead, let's choose to worship a God who works for good in all things, even the things we screwed up. God is always there for us, not teaching us lessons by causing things to happen, but loving us through things that happen. Our hope is not dependent upon finding a reason to explain why bad things happen; our hope is founded on the belief that God is with us. Whether there's a reason or no reason, God is with us. In all things. Always. Thanks be to God.