

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Everything Happens For A Reason

Sunday, January 6, 2018

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Romans 8:31–39

Today I begin a new sermon series called “Does the Bible Say That?” In this series we will be taking a look at common platitudes of faith. Sometimes we see them on bumper stickers. Sometimes we hear them from well-meaning family members or friends. And perhaps some of you may say these phrases to others.

But quite often these popular phrases of faith are casually said without really thinking through what they mean. In fact, quite often people think these phrases come straight from the Bible when they are nowhere to be found in scripture. So we are going to take a closer look at these popular phrases of faith and test them with scripture. My hope is that this series will encourage us to think deeper about our faith. I also hope it will help us think biblically about some of the popular theology in our culture.

Today we begin with a very popular theological phrase. In fact, to me this statement has increased in popularity over the last few years. Even folks who don’t consider themselves religious are quick to say this: “Everything happens for a reason.” How many of you have heard that one? Usually this platitude is said in the context of difficulty or adversity. We get bad news. We are disappointed. Life takes a bad turn and we have a well-meaning friend say to us, “Everything happens for a reason.” Now, this phrase comes in other forms: “God must be testing you” or “It must be God’s will” or “Things don’t happen to you; they happen for you.”

All of these religious phrases could fall under the heading of “Everything happens for a reason.” And they all mean that your difficulty, bad news, problem, or adversity was planned by a higher power, the universe or God. It was supposed to happen to you. There is a larger reason why it happened to you. It was intentional. When Christians say it they mean God orchestrated or planned your adversity for a purpose. God has predetermined everything. We are the puppets and God is manipulating the strings. We just go by the script. Everything that happens, even tragedy and difficulty, has been scripted by God.

I guess some people get comfort by what this platitude implies, but do we really believe that EVERYTHING happens for a reason? Do we really believe that God has orchestrated all the pain and

tragedy in our lives? Do we really believe that? Do we really believe that God is behind the bloodshed and tragedy in the world? Do we really believe that God intentionally plots suffering to see if we can pass a test? And if we do believe all this, what does it say about the God we believe in?

I was at a dinner party over the holidays and spoke to a friend of mine about church. He told me he had not been to church in over 40 years because of the way God had been portrayed in his family. For example, when his sister gave birth to her first child, it was discovered that the child was born with a cleft palate. Their mother told her, while she was still in the hospital, that God was punishing her because she got divorced and remarried! This was the kind of religious household he grew up in and he wanted nothing to do with a God or faith like that! I don’t blame him.

I was at another dinner party over the holidays (isn’t it interesting what you hear at dinner parties?) and we were discussing the prolonged suffering of my father-in-law before he died. Someone expressed that they didn’t want to die like that—with a great deal of suffering. And another person replied, “Well, I am sorry but God takes us when he wants and in the way he wants.” What?

I’ve mentioned to you before that when I was in seminary one of my best friends in college was killed by a drunk driver. He and his girlfriend were on bikes in Austin, Texas, on their way to the hill country for the afternoon. In my friend’s pocket was an engagement ring. He was going to propose marriage to her that day. That proposal never happened. A drunk driver struck both of them, killing my friend instantly. His girlfriend suffered multiple injuries and was in a coma for two months.

I was invited by my friend’s family to read scripture and speak at the funeral. I remember going to the viewing the day before the funeral. It was an open casket. I recall looking at my friend in the casket and someone standing next to me saying something I will never forget. I don’t know who the person was, but he looked at my friend in the casket and said, “It is hard to understand God’s will sometimes.” Now I was ready to give that man a good sermon, but it wasn’t the time or

place. I simply turned to him and said, “God didn’t do this! A drunk driver did!”

God often gets blamed for things that God did not do! We have all heard the language. A baby dies and someone says, “God needed another angel in heaven.” A young mother dies of breast cancer leaving a husband and two kids behind and someone says, “God works in mysterious ways.” A 50-year-old overworks his whole life, doesn’t take care of himself, and dies of a heart attack and someone says, “The Lord knows best.” A group of teenagers on their way to prom are killed in a car accident and someone says, “God must have a purpose.” What? In other words, “Everything happens for a reason.”

Some of you will remember that after 9/11, a well-known religious figure went on television and told the world that God orchestrated 9/11 to punish America for its sins. Then there was the 2010 earthquake in Haiti that annihilated over 200,000 people. Another well-known religious figure got on TV and said that God caused that earthquake. Why? You ready for this? God was punishing Haiti because of its 200-year-old Voodoo practices. And then we wonder why some folks are turned off by Christians and the church? And then we wonder why some folks don’t want to have anything to do with organized religion?

It is beyond me how some folks who read the same Bible I do and follow the same Christ that I follow can believe that God would orchestrate unspeakable tragedy and pain in life. It is beyond me how some folks believe that the same God who personified himself in Christ and put little children on his knee would kill children with cancer, kill teenagers through car accidents, and wipe out families with tornadoes, earthquakes and hurricanes. It is beyond me.

Bottom line folks – Everything does not happen for a reason, at least not in the way people usually mean that phrase. The God I know and love would not plot and plan suffering and tragedy. Sometimes things happen because of the foolishness of others. Sometimes things happen because of our own bad choices. Sometimes things happen because we live in an evil and imperfect world. But let’s not blame tragedy and suffering on God. My back is killing me right now. You know why? Because I hit too many golf balls on the range! God had nothing to do with it!

When God created us he gave us free will. He loves us enough to allow us to choose to love him back. Otherwise, we would be a bunch of robots programmed to love and there is really no such thing as forced love. But the shadow side to a world with free will is that there is room for bad choices, mistakes, bad timing and decisions, all of which can cause pain, difficulty,

frustration, tragedy and adversity. But when bad things happen it doesn’t mean God caused them to happen.

In fact, Jesus himself dispelled this misguided belief in the gospel of Luke. In the 13th chapter Jesus references a construction tragedy that killed 18 laborers. Many people in Jesus’ day assumed that God caused the accident to punish the laborers for their sins. Jesus completely rejected the idea. This is what Jesus said in verse 4, **“Those eighteen who died when the tower of Siloam fell on them – do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you – no!”** There it is – straight from the Bible! And I know that many of you need that reassurance because for too long you have heard Christians blame catastrophes on God. For too long many of you have been heart by people who say in the midst of your pain, “Everything happens for a reason.” In this text Jesus said, “No!”

Of course, the big question this morning is – if not everything happens for a reason, if God is not behind my tragedy and difficulty, then how do I deal with it? How do I make sense of it? If so much of the pain I experience in life is based on the free will of others and the free will of the world, then how am I to be prepared for it when it comes? How am I supposed to handle it? Do I just sit back and act like a victim? Where is God when it hurts? Where is God when planes crash and earthquakes come and people die in car accidents? Where is God when people are shot at a prayer meeting? Where is God and is he involved at all?

Maybe you are dealing with a great burden or difficulty today and you are trying to make sense of it and you don’t know how. Perhaps you wonder where God is in all of it. Maybe you are wondering if God cares and if he can do anything about your difficulty.

This morning I want to share with you a passage of scripture that has changed my life. In fact, this is my favorite passage in the entire Bible. It has carried me through many challenges in my life. It has opened my eyes to things I would have never imagined. This passage has changed the way I see adversity in my life. I have written it down over and over again. I have repeated it as a mantra. I have underlined it in every Bible I have had since I was a teenager. I want to share this passage with you because I believe it can change your life, too.

The passage appears in the book of Romans. Paul is addressing a group of Christians who are familiar with adversity. They have been persecuted for their faith in every way imaginable. They have also dealt with the disappointments of life that all of us share. Paul helps them make sense of their suffering by articulating where God is in all of it.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? –Romans 8:35

Are you worried, afraid or discouraged? Go ahead and make a list of what is difficult for you. Paul makes his own list—hardship, pain, peril, nakedness, the sword? Make a list of your own set of problems right now. Maybe you are lonely, sad, afraid, ashamed, confused, or overwhelmed. Make your list and then ask yourself Paul’s question: Is there anything on that list that can keep the love of Christ away from you? Paul answers that. Take a look:

**No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.
–Romans 8:37–39**

This is the greatest NO in the Bible. Paul says, “No! Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ!” This means that no matter how dark your life gets, no matter how painful or disappointing life becomes, God’s love will always be there to sustain you and empower you. You can handle anything in life because God is always with you! In fact, in Isaiah it says that God not only is with us but he carries our sorrows.

Wherever you are, whatever you are going through, whatever pain you are in, God carries your sorrows. He shares it with you. He cries with you. He aches with you. He loves you too much for you to deal with it alone. You see, Jesus’ death tells us that when we suffer, God suffers with us. That is what the cross and resurrection is all about—God suffers when we suffer and he has the power to redeem our suffering.

That’s what Paul meant when he said, **“We are more than conquerors.” –Romans 8:37.** You see, God is not only with us in the midst of our pain, he not only helps us carry our pain, he not only helps us get through it, but helps us be more than conquerors! How is that possible? How can we more than conquer our pain, difficulty and adversity? Here is the answer:

“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God who are called according to his purpose.” –Romans 8:28

You know what this means? This means that suffering and tragedy is never God’s will but God can

take what is ugly in your life and make it beautiful. So here is today’s message:

Everything that happens to you is not God’s will, but God has a will in everything that happens to you.

God has a will to turn your trouble into triumph. That is the story of the Bible. God is in the transformation business. When evil attacks with difficulty, God transforms it in a way that brings him glory. This means that what life throws at you is not God’s will, but God can take your difficulty and do productive things with it.

You don’t have to be a victim in life! You can walk in confidence in the Lord. You can say, “I don’t know what this day is going to bring, but I know that God will bring me through it. I know that there is nothing I am going to face that God and I can’t handle. I know by the power of God I will be more than a conqueror!”

How do you do this? What is the first step? Pray, “Lord, I hand my pain over to you. You take it and use it for your purposes and glory. Use it in whatever way you want to use it, Lord. It is yours. Do with it what you will.” You may want to keep a journal and mark the day you gave your difficulty to God. Keep track of it and you may be amazed one day how God used it for good!

An inspiring story appeared in the news that shows us what the world means for evil God uses for good. James Wilmert goes to school in Minneapolis. He has a learning disability which makes him an easy target for bullies. He ate by himself at lunch and never played with any other kids. He never had friends come over to his house to play. James was adopted from an orphanage in Colombia. Six years after he was adopted, his adoptive father was killed in an accident. James’ life was filled with pain and loneliness.

But all that changed one day at school. James was being teased and bullied on the playground. Five kids a grade above James saw him being bullied and right then and there made a pact to have his back. Their names are Jack, Jake, Gus, Tyler and Landon. They protect him at school. Every day at lunch they invite him to sit at their table. After lunch, they play football with him and make sure he gets his share of carries and touchdowns. Before, he never went out to play. Now he can barely eat his lunch so he can get out and play with his five new friends.

The kids know he doesn’t have a father to throw a ball to him and they have gladly taken on that role. These five kids are changing him. He loves sports and he is becoming more confident. And get this! When the boys found out James didn’t own a video game system, they pitched in with their own money to buy him a brand

new Play Station! James' mom took this picture at home. She said it was the first time friends from school had ever come over to play with him. A reporter was sent to cover this story and he saw them in a group hug and he heard James say, "All these guys are the best friends anybody could ask for. I love you guys" (sunnyskyz.com).

You see God took something very ugly in James' life and made it beautiful. God took hate and cruelty and transformed into kindness and friendship. It wasn't God's will that James be bullied but God had a will in the midst of his pain and that was to give him five friends who would have his back and care for him and play with him and give him confidence. What the world meant for evil God used for good. With God nothing is impossible. Everything that happens to you is not God's will, but God has a will in everything that happens to you. Amen.

Questions for discussion and/or reflection:

1. Recall a time when someone said to you, "Everything happens for a reason," or something like it. How did it make you feel? How did you respond? If you could go back and have that conversation again, would you respond differently? If so, how?
2. Have you ever said "Everything happens for a reason" to someone? Do you still believe it? If not, what would you say instead to someone who is suffering?
3. The sermon's message was "Everything that happens to you is not God's will, but God has a will in everything that happens to you." What does that sentence mean for you? Does it change the way you understand and respond to pain and suffering in your life? Does it change the way you understand and relate to God? If so, how?



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