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“Everything Happens for a Reason (The Bible Doesn’t Say That)”

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Ephesians 1:9-11 (NRSV)

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A few years ago, I received a call from a distant relative by marriage. Her father was at the Cleveland Clinic, and he was dying. She knew I was a pastor and that my church was nearby. If I could come, maybe it would bring some peace. Of course, I would come.

When I arrived, I found several members of the family gathered at his bedside keeping vigil. As I entered the room, they looked up at me, hopeful for someone to break the spell of standing in awkward silence, watching him breathe, waiting. Most of them had no church affiliation or faith practice, but somehow the presence of a minister made everyone feel a little more at ease. I prayed with them, talked with them, and anointed the dying man. As we stood in as close to a circle as we could manage around his hospital bed, carefully avoiding the tubes and medical devices, a young woman I did not know looked up and fixed her gaze on me. “I’m not a religious person, but I believe in God.” (I get that a lot.) She went on, “I almost died when I was little, and ever since then I have known that everything happens for a reason.”

I can’t remember now what I said in response. Maybe nothing. It wasn’t a question; it was an assertion. But the unexpressed assumption was that this was a belief we would share.

Everything happens for a reason. It’s a maxim that has been repeated so often that many people take it as settled fact. When someone says that, it’s usually meant to explain what cannot be explained, meant to sound wise and somehow reassuring. It even sounds like the sort of thing one might find in the Bible. But the Bible doesn’t say that.

So why do so many people think it does? One reason is our need to make sense of what doesn’t make sense. Some things happen for obvious reasons. I got wet because I left the house without an umbrella when there was rain in the forecast. He got a ticket for parking in a no parking zone. Her friend got a bad grade because she didn’t study. We know *those* things happen for a reason and what the reason is. We don’t need to offer an explanation.

But when things are harder to explain, there’s a tendency to turn to the metaphysical. Leaving the house five minutes later than usual, which made you avoid an accident on your route. Being diagnosed with cancer just when life is really coming together. Losing your job at 50 just when your kids are preparing to go to college. “Why?” is much harder to answer.

“Everything happens for a reason” has some close relatives: “It was his time.” “It’s all part of God’s plan.” “It was meant to be.” Sayings borne out of a desire to have things make sense, for there to be some clear explanation for why everything happens. If there’s an explanation, even if we don’t know what it is, then there must be some order and logic in the world. Somehow, it makes us feel better to think that someone is in charge of everything that happens and has a master plan. And usually that someone is God.

But drawing that logic all the way out leads us to some pretty horrible conclusions. Was it God’s plan that 6 million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust? Was it God’s design that a man would walk into an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas and kill nineteen children and two adults? Was it God’s idea to send religious extremists onto passenger jets and crash them into the World Trade Center 21 years ago today?

After Kate Bowler, a 35-year-old seminary professor with a toddler son, was diagnosed with stage IV cancer, a well-meaning neighbor brought a casserole to their house. She also brought what she thought were words of comfort. As she handed the dish to Kate’s husband, she said, “Everything happens for a reason, I guess.”

“I’d love to hear it,” he said in reply.

“Pardon?”

“The reason my wife is dying. I’d love to hear it.”¹ That was the end of the conversation.

¹ Kate Bowler. *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I’ve Loved*. New York: Penguin Random House (2018), 112.

But if the Bible doesn't say that everything happens for a reason, where do some people get the idea that it does? It actually does say some things that, when taken out of context and combined with conventional wisdom, appear to support it. Like other things we hear *about* the Bible, it's a good idea to go straight to the source and take a closer look. Augustine, a philosopher-theologian and bishop who lived around the turn of the fifth century CE, wrestled with how to reconcile a God who is loving and all powerful with the reality of suffering in the world. Unwilling to concede either God's omnipotent power or unconditional love, Augustine concluded that God must have a plan that is beyond human comprehension. And he found places in the Bible that appeared to support his theory.

Eleven centuries later, a French theologian named John Calvin would build on Augustine's ideas. He studied the letters of Paul and other Epistles that spoke of God's will. He noted that those passages also mentioned divine knowledge and destiny. As a teacher in the early Protestant movement, he largely developed what became the doctrine of predestination, the idea that God planned from the beginning of time everything that would happen. A Bible passage that was critical to his work is the first chapter of Ephesians, from which we read today. Calvin worked with Greek and Latin versions of the Bible, but it's hard to overstate the influence his work had on Bible translators then and ever since. Two words merit particular scrutiny. I'm not an academic on the level of John Calvin, but I share the concerns of many more eminently qualified theologians and scholars. The first of these words is "destined," found in verse five. Some translations go so far as to render it "predestined." The Greek word here is *proorisas*, which means "to pre-establish boundaries," like going over the ground rules before a baseball game. Setting boundaries is considerably different from determining the outcome. Boundaries provide safety or guidance, but predestination implies a fate, a pre-determined "destination" or arrival point. It's an important distinction when we're talking about suffering and loss, but it's absolutely critical when we're talking about salvation and eternity. If God predetermines who will be saved, that also means God decides who will not. And that raises serious questions about how loving and forgiving God is, something about which the Bible is much more insistent.

The other word we should note is translated as *will*; specifically, God's will. The Greek word used here is *thelēmatos*. It means will or desire, God's preference for us. As long as we think of God's will as the direction God intends or hopes for us, it is a good thing. We should all want to pursue the path God wants for us, not choose to go a different way (though we often do). It's when we start to think of God's will as a path that God has laid out for us from which we *cannot* deviate that things go sideways. Throughout the Bible, we find indications of God's guidance, urging us toward paths of life and hope. But the Bible also makes clear that it is *a choice* whether to go where God guides us or to choose another way. And that's an important distinction. It's the difference between playing a part in a play that's already been written or being free to improvise. That also means that everything that happens *to us* isn't necessarily the result of God's master plan. Sometimes things happen and it's to no one's credit or blame.

The letter to the Ephesians does speak of God's plan, a big-picture plan for the fullness of time, that God will draw all people to Godself through Christ. It's a design for eternity, not an explanation for why it's raining or what you ate for breakfast or when you're going to die.

After her diagnosis, Kate Bowler wrote extensively to record her journey with terminal cancer, including a book titled, *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*. Since then, she's received countless letters ranging from gratitude and deep appreciation to condemnation and scorn. One letter was written by a woman who described that letting go of the idea that there's a reason for everything helped her no longer to see God as cruel.²

Augustine and Calvin were trying to solve a theological problem: how to reconcile human suffering with an omnipotent God who is loving and good. By refusing to cede any of God's power, they unwittingly rendered God capricious and yes, even cruel. While it is unfair to lay the burden of platitudes like "Everything happens for a reason" squarely on the shoulders of Augustine and Calvin, the doctrines they developed surely contributed to a mindset of divine order behind everything.

That's not to suggest that God is indifferent to suffering. We find in the pages of scripture ample evidence of God's compassion and love, even heartbreak at the suffering God's children experience. God is neither pulling all the strings nor completely absent. God is with us, sometimes nudging us, sometimes giving us space to grow, and sometimes drawing us close. Perhaps it's better to think of God's will not as a plan to be executed, but as a hope to be discovered. Of course, most people aren't trying to make a theological point when they say something like, "Everything happens for a reason." We just want to say something to help make sense of a difficult situation. We may feel a need to offer words

² *ibid*, 114.

of comfort or encouragement, but we don't know what else to say. Or perhaps admitting we don't know what to say or why bad things happen would require us to accept that there are things our faith cannot yet explain.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, we encounter the Book of Job, a story all about suffering. It doesn't offer much in the way of explaining *why* bad things happen, but it can teach us some important lessons. After his family is wiped out, his home destroyed, and he is inflicted with terrible pain, three friends come to visit Job. Before they dole out chapter after chapter of bad advice, they do the most helpful thing in the whole story: they sit with Job in silence for seven whole days before speaking. There's a lesson in that for us.

Our most faithful response in difficult times isn't motivational poster advice or theological doctrines or quotations that may or may not actually come from the Bible. The first letter of John tells us, "God is love and those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them" (1 John 4:16). We may not be able to explain why everything happens – good or bad – and we probably shouldn't even try. But we can show up. And we can bear witness to God's presence, a presence so powerful, so enduring that nothing – nothing – in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39). The Bible *does* say that. Thanks be to God. Amen.