

Sandra Brown

*Yes and No: Everything Happens for a Reason*

Psalm 139:1-16, Ecclesiastes 9:11-12, John 9:1-7

June 17, 2018

We've heard these sayings before, and perhaps even said them ourselves. "God helps those who help themselves." "Everything happens for a reason." "God will never give you more than you can handle." They sound like they could come straight from the Bible, but they don't. Are they true? Yes . . . and NO. Last week we looked at the saying, "God helps those who help themselves," which an overwhelming number of Americans not only believe is in the Bible but believe is the central message of the Bible (it is not). I had someone at the 8:30 service say to me afterwards, "You know, the one I really hate is cleanliness is next to godliness," and he's right, that's not in there either. But today, we look at another beloved saying: "Everything happens for a reason." Albert Schweitzer said it. Marilyn Monroe said it. Oprah says it all the time. But the Bible does not. Is it true? Yes . . . and NO. It's true in that for every effect, there is generally a cause. For example, if I or any member of the choir should happen to pass out in the middle of this sermon, it's probably because it is pretty warm in here and we are wearing long, polyester robes . . .

But generally, "Everything happens for a reason" is something we hear in response to suffering. When I hear this phrase, I think of a performing chalk artist named Bill Leach, whom I watched many years ago as a kid. He performed at churches, and Fellowship of Christian Athletes conferences, and I don't know where else. But he'd get up in front of a crowd and with dramatic music playing in the background, he'd start to draw, and we'd all watch in mesmerized silence as he took the chalk and made a landscape, and then maybe a town in the background, and since he often drew a scene of the empty cross, we'd start to see a hillside take shape as

he drew, and maybe the beginnings of a beautiful sunset. And when he was about 2/3 of the way into it, give or take, he'd often take a black piece of chalk and just slash right across this beautiful scenic picture. Just when we could see how great the picture was going to be, he'd go and make this hideous black mark, and people would gasp in horror, wondering, what is this guy doing? He just ruined this beautiful painting!

But then Bill would keep going. He'd finish up the hillside, and the cross, or empty tomb, or whatever it was, and then he'd go back to that mark. And he'd draw some more, and pretty soon that mark would become a majestic tree, or a part of the hillside, something absolutely beautiful that enhanced the picture in a way that only he, as the artist, could have visualized when he first made that ugly, black slash mark down the middle of the scene.

When we say, "Everything happens for a reason," I think we're saying that God is like Bill the artist. Our lives are like a painting in progress. Sometimes, when we least expect it, God takes the black chalk and makes an ugly mark in the middle. But if we just hang in there, eventually we'll see that those dark marks were no accident, but part of God's vision for our lives, and the finished picture will be far more beautiful and interesting than they would have been without those marks.

For example, we might be disappointed when we don't get a job that we really, really wanted. But maybe not getting that job was the push we needed to start the business we'd always dreamed, and now, ten years later, business is flourishing. And we say, see? Everything happens for a reason. OR—maybe a relationship doesn't go the way we wanted it to. We thought he or she was the ONE. And then they went and dumped us for somebody else, and it felt like we could never love again, but then one day we meet the real true love of our lives on the elevator or Tinder or wherever, and we think, yes. Everything happens for a reason.

There are a couple problems with this. If we say that everything happens for a reason, it might keep us from taking responsibility for our actions. Like, maybe the reason I got dumped is that I acted like a jerk. Instead of saying, “Everything happens for a reason,” I might be better off learning how to treat people better.

And second, sometimes we don’t meet the love of our lives or have a successful business. Sometimes, distance runners who eat five pounds of fruit a day and never touch a French fry get cancer. A tornado takes out half a town with little or no warning. A young father who’s never had so much as a parking ticket heads home from his night job and is killed by a drunk driver. Children too small to reach the big kid water fountain are shot and killed by someone who walks into a school with an automatic weapon. And 9 million people a year die from hunger and malnutrition. Are those things part of God’s plan? What kind of a God plans things like that?

In our scripture readings today, we hear several different perspectives on how God works in the world. In Psalm 139, we see that God is intimately involved in every detail of who we are. God knows us better than we know ourselves! God knows our thoughts, God knows what we’re going to say, God is hands-on, and holding us tight. In Ecclesiastes, the writer observes that accidents can happen to anyone, anytime, no matter how deserving or undeserving. And in the gospel of John, Jesus views a disability not as a punishment for something somebody did, but as an opportunity for God’s power and glory to be revealed, at least for this one particular man. How do we put these different voices together?

Throughout all of scripture, like a drumbeat, we hear the call to choose. Choose life, choose whom we will serve, choose to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. God is in charge, yes, but God gives us freedom, and our choices matter. I like how Adam Hamilton puts it in his book Half Truths: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn’t Say. He

says that God is neither a micromanager nor an absentee landlord—rather, “The reason most things happen is not because God willed them, but because of the decisions we make or the laws that govern nature and our interaction with them. Yet God superintends. God wrote the laws of nature. God has a will and a plan for humanity” (41-42).

He goes on to quote the Apostle Paul writing 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.” That’s Romans 8:28, a favorite verse for many Christians, including me. But Paul doesn’t say that God makes everything happen for a reason, only that God will ultimately bring good out of it. In other words, God does not start drawing and then purposely put black slash marks down the middle. But if a tragedy comes along and leaves its ugly mark, God will bring good out of it. And if someone else is facing a tragedy, I’d be very careful about quoting Romans 8:28 to that person.

Kate Bowler is a professor in her mid-30’s at Duke Divinity School who made her career by studying the prosperity gospel, the popular belief system that sees fortune as a blessing from God and misfortune as a mark of God’s disapproval. She wrote a book called Blessed, which I bought a couple years ago when it first came out.

Even though she thought she knew better, Bowler says she ended up buying into her own version of the prosperity gospel, in which she believed she could curate her life, minimize her losses, and stand on her successes. She had a wonderful husband, a beautiful new baby boy, and success in her field.

Last year, Bowler was diagnosed with Stage IV colon cancer and given less than a year to live. In her new book, Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I’ve Loved, Bowler writes, “God had a worthy plan for my life in which every setback would also be a step forward. I wanted God to make me good and make me

faithful, with just a few shining accolades along the way. Anything would do if hardships were only detours on my long life's journey. I believed God would make a way." And then she writes, "I don't believe that anymore." If you've ever struggled with the unfairness of cancer or any other condition, I highly recommend her book, especially the appendix at the back of the book, which she titles: "Absolutely Never Say This to People Experiencing Terrible Times: A Short List." Number five is, "*Everything happens for a Reason.*" She says, "When someone is drowning, the only thing worse than failing to throw them a life preserver is handing them a reason" (p. 170). And even worse than that is pretending that you know that reason.

When we say, "Everything happens for a reason," we don't mean any harm by it. We are just so horrified at the thought of living in a world where we are not in control, that for some people it actually feels more reassuring to think that God purposely caused a plane to crash than to face the awful unfairness of things.

I don't think it's bad to wonder why, and to think about reasons. If we never asked why, we'd never discover treatment for diseases, or learn how to build stronger buildings that protect people from storms. But if a reason compromises the goodness of God, it's not a true reason. Instead of saying, "Everything happens for a reason," we might try "Lord, have mercy." Or better yet, silence. Sometimes the best thing to do with a grieving person is show up and shut up. And bring presents, which is number one on Bowler's list of the helpful things to do for a friend facing tough times.

A good word for us today might be humility. God is God. We are made in God's image, but we are not God. That means we will always live with mystery. We don't always get to see who or what caused the black marks on the drawing that is our life. We may not even live long enough to what God does with them in this life. But whatever comes our way, we can look to the picture of Christ, whose life,

death, and resurrection testify again and again and again that there is no suffering so painful, no humiliation so unfair, that God cannot redeem it. Christ shows us a God who loves us infinitely, a God we can trust with all of who we are, and nothing can mess up the glory of that picture. Amen.