

NEW TESTAMENT READING: Romans 8:22-28

pg 158 NT

²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in^[a] hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes^[b] for what is seen? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

²⁶Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes^[c] with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷And God,^[d] who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit^[e] intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.^[f]

²⁸We know that all things work together for good^[g] for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

OLD TESTAMENT READINGS: Deuteronomy 30:19-20a pg 186 OT

¹⁹This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now **choose** life, so that you and your children may live ²⁰and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God**

Common but not Biblical Wisdom Pt 2

Today we continue in our summer sermon series regarding “wisdoms” which are often thought to be in the Bible but aren’t. Last week we considered, “*God helps those who help themselves*”. This week, let’s think on: “*Everything Happens for a Reason*”. You certainly have heard this. Maybe you’ve said it. I suppose I have too at some point. It seems reasonable. And in fact, it can be supported in the Bible if we’re talking about cause and effect, action and consequence. Our choices, good and bad, have results. A choice to lie will result in us not be trusted in the future. A choice to drive while drunk will eventually result in someone getting hurt and us having to face hefty fines or prison time. The OT Scripture, read this morning, is about Moses giving the Hebrews a choice to love God and then live in peace or to not follow the Lord and die. The phrase, “*Everything Happens for a Reason*”, while not in the Bible per se has some Biblical truth to it if considered in terms of cause and effect.

However, the phrase is usually said with a different purpose. It is said in an effort to comfort or console another person through a difficult time, to provide an answer to something hard to make sense of. When I was working as a chaplain, I heard it sometimes said by someone when their friend had lost a loved one: “*It was meant to be,*” they’d say, “*It was God’s will, their time. God must have needed them in heaven. Everything happens for a reason.*” Ouch. Even though I was grateful that it was said by well-meaning people, I would wince because the logic is faulty and leads to some ridiculous and sometimes very troubling conclusions.

First, if everything happens according to God’s will, then whatever we do must have been wanted and needed by God or else God would not have let it happen.¹

- *Oh, I forget your Father’s Day present, Dad. Must have been the will of God.*
- *God sure loves the Capitals more than the Knights. God made them win the Stanley Cup*
- *If I cheat on my spouse, it must have been part of God’s plan. The devil didn’t make me abandon my children, I must have been part of God accomplishing some greater purpose.*

¹Adam Hamilton, “*Half Truths. God Helps Those Who Help Themselves & Other Things the Bible Doesn’t Say*” (Nashville: Abingdon; 2016), 17-49.

Secondly, with this faulty logic, God becomes the bad guy, responsible for everything, including the terrible things which happen...every airplane crash, drowning, rape or murder, every cancer, fire, war...

- *Did God want those dogs to die in that hot car this week?*
- *Did God will Hurricane Maria to hit Puerto Rico?*
- *Does God really want 50,000 children die of starvation/disease in Yemen this year?*

As Adam Hamilton says, *“Tragedies with this kind of logic are understood to not happen in spite of God’s will but because of it”*.² It is faulty reasoning... for our God is pure love and light and life and God’s will is for us to be the same! Jesus dispelled the faulty logic of the phrase when, in Luke 13, he referenced a construction tragedy which killed 18 workers. Many people in Jesus’ day, like ours, assumed that God caused such an accident to punish people for their sins. Jesus said, *“Those 18 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!”*

With the usual use of *“Everything Happens for a Reason”*, what we do becomes excused as God’s will and God gets blamed for bad things. Also, fatalistic or indifferent perspectives creep in. *“Why bother... Whatever will be, will be.” There’s no point in trying to change anything”, “Let’s eat, drink & be merry for tomorrow we may die.”* Sound familiar? And not only this, warped understandings of God’s sovereignty develop. These are that God is like a clockmaker, creating and setting everything in motion and then letting things “happen”, run on their own *OR* that the sovereign God is a micromanager, a controller, a determiner of “everything”, including all that we do or don’t do, including our path toward salvation or damnation.³

Just so that you know, we Presbyterians hold very dear the tenet of God’s sovereignty, because we know that God is Creator and Ruler of all. John Calvin, in fact, professed that whatever happens in our lives reflects God’s desire and good purpose. He said, *“There is not*

² Adam Hamilton.

³ Adam Hamilton.

*one blade of grass, there is no color in this universe that is not created to make us rejoice.*⁴

But yet, we Presbyterians believe that while God has created and rules over all things, including time (God knows the beginning, middle and end of the book all at once), God chooses to not determine or cause EACH AND EVERY movement of creation. We do not deny that God can and does act directly. Of course, we don't, but we believe that in divine freedom, God chooses to not determine or cause each movement of creation. God instead chooses to walk with us each day, in each turn of the page, working always an eternal plan for good. In other words, as a general rule God knows when a sparrow falls to the ground but does not cause it to do so.

God has given us, you see, a great gift...it is human agency, free will, the freedom to choose the way to walk. This is a gift of love. God wants that we live abundant free lives. And we cannot really do this if we are robots, determined, controlled to go God's way. Of course, God also wants us to choose the right and just way, and God has sent Jesus to show us and the Spirit to work in us so that we can. But God does not force us. God knows that we will at times choose the wrong path, and God doesn't abandon us when we do. God continues to rescue us and enfold us in an embrace of redeeming grace all our lives.

Two of my friends had a mildly mentally disabled son. When he was about 18, he asked to learn to drive. So, true to form, they enrolled him in Driver's Ed and spent a lot of time teaching him, showing him the way. Eventually, he knew the rules of the road and could sit for his test. After a try or two, he passed and was given his license. We celebrated...that is, until he asked for the keys to the car. The rubber hit the road. My friends told me that the night they gave him the keys was one of the hardest things they'd ever done. They really wanted to just keep him always with them, secure and safe at home. However, they knew that was not a real life and they loved him enough to take the risk that he might make wrong choices in the real world, choices which could potentially take his life, in order that he might live! And sure enough, that first night he ate of the apple, so to speak. He made a choice which resulted in him

⁴ John Calvin. https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/john_calvin_182887 (accessed 6-15-2018)

being involved in a minor accident. I don't recall the details, but the car's marks on the telephone pole on W Adams can still be seen. There were a couple of other accidents too in those first months, times when his parent had to rescue him from his predicaments. But their trust in his freedom to choose and their love to walk alongside him won out. Now, I see him buzzing around town, in his little car, confident and very secure.

Yes, as Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28). Paul was writing on his way to trial before the emperor. He was encouraging the Christians in Rome to persevere in their suffering, reminding them that when Christ comes again everything will be renewed and healed. They were not alone in their suffering and waiting.⁵ Rather than telling them that suffering was God's will, he told them that no matter what happens, however bad it gets, God would bring good to all who love him. “God forces evil to accomplish good.”⁶

Friends, I don't believe...I do not believe that God wills children to suffer, NONE, no not one, or causes planes to crash, or volcanoes to erupt or cancer or heart attacks or strokes. I do not believe that God directs shooters to kill, or drug addicts to take another pill. I do not believe that God causes animals to suffer or oceans, forests, and air to be polluted. We are part of a free but sinful, broken world, a world that is in the already BUT NOT YET! I finally do not believe that God prevents the consequences of our behavior to come our way.

However, I do believe....I do believe that God works wondrous graces out of terrible happenings. In fact, we are all who we are because God has done good things with our most painful experiences and bad choices. I do believe... that the truth of the resurrection is that painful experiences, bad choices, suffering will not have the final word. Jesus has defeated sin and death. It is doomed. Love and life have won. And I do believe... that while God does not promise us a pain-free life, God promises us a free life, one in which we can choose God's way

⁵Charley Reeb. “Pop Verses: Romans 8:28” <https://www.pasadenacommunitychurch.org/wp-content/uploads/June-19-2016-sermon.pdf> (accessed 6/15/28).

⁶ Adam Hamilton

and make the world a better place. And we can do so with the confidence that God is always there to teach and guide, to comfort and lift-up, to rescue and hold forever.

“All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” This is the Biblical wisdom. Thanks be to God who give us the victory through our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.