

## *Half Truths*

### ***“Everything Happens for a Reason”***

#### [Deuteronomy 30:19-20a](#)

Today, we begin a new sermon series titled, “Half Truths,” inspired by the book Rev. Adam Hamilton wrote a couple of years ago of the same name. He is the senior pastor of the United Methodist Church of Resurrection in the Kansas City area. With an average weekly attendance over 10,000 and a leadership institute that draws about 2000 people from across the country, his church is considered to be the most influential mainline church in America.

In his book, *Half Truths*, Adam carefully examines 5 statements of belief commonly used by many Christians. Here are the statements: 1. Everything happens for a reason; 2. God helps those who help themselves; 3. God won’t give you more than you can handle; 4. God said it, I believe it, that settles it; 5. Love the sinner, hate the sin. I am sure most of you have heard these statements and perhaps may have even said some of them to others. But, are they true? Are they biblical statements?

Pastor Adam says he had believed and used all of the statements early in his life as a Christian. But, through his ministry as a pastor, teaching and preaching the Bible week after week and reaching out to people in pastoral care, he began to question his theological assumptions for those statements and ultimately realized that they reflect only partial truths. So, thanks to the brilliant and humble Pastor Adam and his work, we, too are going to examine the 5 statements of belief commonly used by Christians and discover the whole truths behind them.

Today, we start with the first one: “Everything Happens for a Reason.” This statement is true if it’s talking about cause and effect. We all know actions create consequences. That’s what Moses was talking about in today’s scripture from Deuteronomy. He said to his people that choosing life, loving God and obeying God’s law would bring God’s blessings to them and their descendents.

But, usually, when people say “Everything happens for a reason,” it is not about cause and effect but usually in response to human suffering. We say such statements or something similar to it, trying to comfort people who are going through a difficult time. And, the theological assumptions behind the statement are the following:

- *God is in charge of everything that happens in our lives.*
- *Whether they are personal or communal, whether they are good or bad, they all reflect the will and purpose of God for us.*
- *When bad things happen to us, though we might not understand why, we just have to accept them as God’s will and try to find what God is trying to tell or teach us through those things.*

However, when you carefully examine the statement, “Everything happens for a reason” and explore the theological assumptions behind it, you soon realize that it is a flawed statement. It can eliminate personal

responsibility and make God responsible for our actions. See how this line of reasoning can play out in the news stories just from yesterday:

- Residents of Hawaii got an emergency alert of ballistic missile attack. It turned out to be false and the result of human error. But, God must have willed it to happen to help people prepare for a real one.
- A Louisiana postal worker admitted in federal court that he burned 20 tubs of mail instead of delivering them. He can face up to 5 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine. But, he cannot be responsible for his actions because God allowed him to do it and there must be a greater purpose for his actions.
- Mudslides in Southern California have claimed 18 lives, and 7 people are still missing. With the wildfires last year and now with rain rains and mudslides, God must be trying to send a message to those living in California.

We can go on and on, blaming God for everything with this logic. But, do you really believe that everything happens as God planned or in accordance with God's will? Can you really say that even terrible things, such as child abuse, domestic violence, murder, rape, torture, war, starvation, pollution, wildfires, earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, and tsunamis that claim people's lives are part of God's plan?

All Christians share a common belief in God's providence and sovereignty. We believe that our creator God superintends the universe and oversees what happens on our planet, exercising God's ultimate authority, power, and dominion over all creation. While there are different views of how God's rule is carried out, John Calvin and John Wesley's theological views have been the most influential.

Calvin, who was one of the most important figures in the Protestant Reformation, was a proponent of a view that is sometimes referred to as theological determinism. He believed in God's absolute sovereignty. According to this argument, if even one thing happens that is not God's will, then it means that God does not have dominion over everything. He believed that absolutely everything happened according to God's will and command. For instance, God was at work directing every aspect of the weather, down to the movement of the wind.

Living in a time before scientific knowledge about weather patterns, it was natural for Calvin to believe that whatever happened in people's lives reflected God's desire and purpose. In fact, there are stories in the Bible that can support his deterministic belief because, in the ancient world, weather events were indeed perceived to be God's direct reaction to human behavior.

Another focus of Calvin's theological determinism was called predestination, which means that God predetermined everything that happens. According to this view, God has a script of your life written out, even before you are born, and your life plays out according to what the script says. You have no choice but to live a life as predetermined by God. In fact, you are here now because you are predestined to be here! It's in your script. Even your salvation is already determined by God. If you are among the elect, you will be saved no matter how hard you try to reject God's grace. But, if you are not among the elect, you are already doomed no matter how much you desire salvation. There is nothing you can do to change the course of your life.

John Wesley, another prominent figure in the Protestant Reformation and the founder of Methodism, also believed in God's sovereignty and providence. However, he rejected Calvin's theology of predestination and instead taught that God wills all of humanity to be saved. Through what Wesley identified as prevenient grace, justifying grace, and sanctifying grace, he explained that we were endowed with free will, or the ability to make our own choices. Wesley believed that although God knew us fully and therefore foresaw how we would act in a given situation, we were given the grace to retain our autonomy, the dignity and freedom to make decisions for ourselves.

There are biblical references to support Wesley's image of God. In the book of Genesis, we read how God made the universe, the world, and everything in it. God placed Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden and gave them dominion over it. God put human beings in charge of what happens on earth. God gives us the responsibility to take care of God's creation on God's behalf. We see human agency at work in the story of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the garden. God tells Adam and Eve not to touch it. They are given a *choice*.

Certainly, this is not a picture of a God who dictates and micromanages our lives, directing everything for us according to a set plan. Instead, God is more like a parent who gives his children the freedom to make their own choices, a parent who allows her children to make mistakes and learn from the consequences of their own choices.

Throughout the Bible, we read how God shows God's people the right path and warns against taking the wrong path. Today's text is one of those scriptures. Here, on behalf of God, Moses is showing the Israelites two paths into the Promised Land: one leads to life and the other to death. They can hold fast to God and find life, or they can turn away from God and find death. God's people are given the freedom to choose their own future. It is the same gift of human agency and dominion over their lives given to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Likewise, we have been given the gift of dominion over certain spheres of our lives. God gave us a brain, a heart, and a conscience to use in making choices that align to God's will. By relying on the scriptures in the Bible as our guide and using our faculty of reasoning and experience to interpret them for our specific time and context, we can make choices that enrich our lives and those around us. However, this gift of autonomy and agency can also mean that we make the wrong choices, which we come to regret, choices that end up hurting ourselves and our neighbors.

It may be comforting to believe in the certainty that everything happens for a reason. This is especially true when something bad happens. We want to believe that it's all for a greater purpose, one that we cannot understand with our limited knowledge and comprehension.

Bad things happen, for many different reasons. And sometimes, they just happen without rhyme or reason. But, these things do not happen because God willed it or God wants to teach us something through them. It is not God's will nor desire to see God's children suffer. So, God does not give people cancer. God does not take away our loved ones from us. God does not allow children to die. God does not allow women to be raped. God does not cause tragedy. This simply is not true!

However, when tragedy occurs, let us remember that God is in the midst of it, suffering with those who suffer, crying with those who cry. Let us hear the words of Isaiah, which Jesus affirmed in the beginning of his ministry: “The LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.”

Though we may be in a temporary state of suffering, we Christians are sustained by hope, a belief that tragedy is not where the story ends. We know that death does not have the final say. It is the empty tomb to which our ancestors in faith point towards. In the midst of the brokenness of our lives and in the world, God announces, “Behold, I am making all things new.”

Brothers and Sisters, may we find comfort in this assurance, that it is God who works in the midst of tragedy in our lives to bring about something good and beautiful, something new. Thanks be to God who gives us this assurance of transformation and new life through the power of resurrection of Jesus Christ!  
Amen.