

Half Truths: 1. Does Everything Happen for a Reason?

Deuteronomy 30:19-20a; Romans 8:28

January 6, 2019

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In 1985, the coca-cola company reformulated the recipe for Coke, a soft drink known around the world, and in its place introduced New Coke. Looking back on that decision, it was a disaster. They received tens of thousands of phone calls and letters. Public protests were organized. When the ads were shown at sporting events, the crowds booed. It nearly destroyed Coca-Cola. So why would they do this? After World War II, Coke had 60% market share but by the early 1980s, it was down to 28% as many other brands came into the market. So they did studies on sweetness and found that people wanted extra sweetness in their drink. Thus, New Coke. In hindsight it was one of the worst product decisions ever. We know that now, but at the time they weren't stupid. They made a decision based on ill-informed assumptions that they thought were true. How could a company like that make such a mistake that alienated an entire planet, replacing what people valued with what didn't want? They did it because their assumptions were ill-informed.

Sometimes, we say things and do things based on assumptions. It happens in business and in government. It also happens in faith. There are deeply committed, caring and compassion Christians who say and do things. They're not stupid, but they are using assumptions that are ill-informed. In 1633, a man by the name of Galileo had a theory that the universe was not earth-centric but solar-centric, and it was Christians who put him in prison because their assumptions were wrong. They leveraged the Bible to prove that the earth is the center of the universe. The Bible said so. Ecclesiastes 1:5 **The sun rises, the sun sets; it returns panting to the place where it dawns.** But Solomon wrote these words, not as a matter of science but poetry, but people took these words and their own experience – every day the sun moves across the sky. But their assumptions were wrong.

Sometimes there are things that sound true, and we keep saying them so they must be true: laughter is the best medicine, or every cloud has a silver lining, or everything happens for a reason. Often it is in a time of crisis when we can't explain the gap between the way things are and the way things should be. We live in a world of inconsistencies and yet we crave a world of certainties.

Why did it happen? I don't know, but everything happens for a reason – and we can say it often enough or hear it often enough that it must be true. But when there is a car wreck and someone is paralyzed for the rest of their lives – it must have happened for a reason? Or someone gets cancer? Or a child is abused? Or someone dies? What we hope is that what we say it will bring comfort and somehow fill the gap, but it doesn't.

Kate Bowling has written a memoir of her diagnosis with a terminal form of colon cancer when was 35 years old, married to her childhood sweetheart, an infant son, a teaching position at Duke University. She titled her book, *Everything happen for a reason and other lies I love to hear*. After her diagnosis, people meant well. They meant to offer reassurances: God must have a secret plan, right? God is writing a better story. This is a test and God will make you stronger. When God closes a door, God opens a window. Everything happens for a reason.

So, does everything happen for a reason? Is everything that happens what God wants to fulfill God's master plan? If this is so, what about last Sunday's football game – sorry Vikings fans, God must have wanted it to happen that way! Or that sweater you got from Grandma that doesn't fit, it must be God's way of saying it's time to lose weight – even if you don't have any

weight to lose. Part of the problem with “everything happens for a reason” is that it removes personal responsibility. Because whatever you did was because God wanted you to do it. Cheat on your spouse – it’s okay, because it happened for a reason. It was a horrible thing to do but it’s part of God’s plan. Someone is texting while driving, crosses the center line, and hits another car – part of God’s plan? God was behind it. Really?

If that was true, it would make God to be a monster. All of the horrible things we hear about in the news – murder, rape, abuse, acts of violence, children dying of starvation. To say it’s all part of God’s plan though we can’t see it yet – is that comforting or satisfying or even make sense biblically?

How does God work? We call this PROVIDENCE. The root word is provide – how God provides. We believe that God created all of creation, that God is involved, that God provides. We also say that God is SOVEREIGN – that God is the highest authority, the King of the Universe. Some Christians who believe that “everything happens for a reason” and nothing happens without God willing it to happen – that God has total and absolute control. And then, there are other Christians who think of God as the one who set everything in motion and stepped back to watch what happens. Like an absentee landlord. I think most Christian fall somewhere between these two. At the end of Genesis, chapter 1, the humans are given responsibility. **Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and master it. Take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, and everything crawling on the ground.** God has put us in charge of some things, given us responsibility, the freedom to make choices, and when we mess up or miss the mark, it’s not God’s who did this, but us.

In this morning’s scripture from Deuteronomy, Moses has come to the end of his life. He led the people in the wilderness for forty years and now they are on the edge of the Promised Land. He lays out the commandments that God has given them, and then he says: **I have set life and death, blessing and curse before you. Now choose...** He’s saying, I have set a two paths in front of you. Choose this way, and do these things. They will be life-giving. But there is another path – one that is caring only about you and nobody else – but that path leads to death. You have a choice, but I’m begging you – choose life. If we had no choice – if God controlled everything, why would Moses even say this? It’s because God created you, and gave you the capacity to reason, and you can live according to his purposes of love and justice, but you must decide – or decide to walk away. God keeps trying to direct us in a path, but we choose. Sometimes, we make a choice and there’s a cost, or the choice we make hurts others or ourselves. The Bible does not give us a God of maximum control but maximum support.

God wants to work in and through us. Every morning, I wake up and say: “Here I am, Lord. Thank you for giving me this day. And so, I give my life to you. Use me.” And my job is to pay attention. I think of it like this Fit Bit that I wear. It tracks the number of steps that I take every day. The goal is to reach 10,000 steps every day. It doesn’t make me walk, but 10 minutes before every hour, it vibrates to tell me I’ve not been walking, and I have ten minutes to get in 250 steps. And when I get to 10,000 steps, it starts buzzing and fireworks appear on the screen. It can’t make me take steps, but it nudges me. And that’s how God works. God nudges me. I was at Fairview Southdale Hospital. Very rarely do I visit that hospital but someone from this church was having surgery and I was there to say a prayer before they went into surgery. As I walked into the hospital, I had this feeling that I should walk through the waiting room. It’s not the direction I was headed but I felt this nudge to go to the waiting room and as I did, a woman looked up at me and said, “Steve, I was hoping you would come.” I had not seen her in more than 20 years – and would not have recognized her, but I sat down next to her and listened as she told me how her husband was in surgery and wasn’t sure he would make it – and I prayed

with her. Was that just a coincidence? There may be times when something happens for a reason, but not everything happens for a reason.

In Romans 8:28, Paul is writing to the Christians in Rome, and he says: **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.** He doesn't say that God makes bad things happen, but whatever does happen, God can use it for good. God can redeem suffering and hurt and pain so that it will not be end when you trust God. God does not give us cancer or cause someone to murder or abuse children, but even those experiences are not the end when we trust God.

In my first few weeks at Messiah Church, I received a phone calling asking me to come to the Intensive Care Unit at HCMC in downtown Minneapolis. Brent Hillbrands, 27 year old son of Lyle and Cindy had fallen 16 feet onto a concrete floor, landing on his head. When I arrived at the hospital, the waiting room was filled with family and friends and Lyle, Cindy, and I went to Brent's bedside and prayed –I prayed as hard as I've ever prayed, asking God to perform a miracle, to be the healing presence that Brent needed. Brent was baptized and confirmed in this church. At the time, he had a lawn mowing and snow removal business and this church was one of his customers. The next night, we organized a prayer service for Brent, again praying that God would intervene. But after 3 ½ days and never regaining consciousness, he died. I think the hardest thing in this world is to watch a child die – and Lyle and Cindy and their daughter, Michelle were devastated. They asked, "why?" And there was no adequate answer. I didn't even try because even if there was an answer it would not bring comfort. Their process of coming to terms with what happened and finding some sense of healing took years. They found comfort in the West Suburban Grief Coalition – and eventually became facilitators. In their effort to cope with what happened and to find a way to honor Brent's life, they got involved in the development of our Celebration Garden, and then the columbarium.

So last week, I asked Lyle and Cindy about how their faith has changed in the 18 years since Brent's death. With their permission, let me read their words:

We will never believe "things happen for a reason" because there is no reason to this. Why would God take a healthy 27-year-old full of zest for life? What we do believe is life happens and there can be tragedies in life and God was there the instant Brent fell and has walked along beside us throughout this horrific journey and helped us be more compassionate, reach out more to help others, and appreciate each day we are given because we don't know what tomorrow holds. We miss Brent every single day and know with God's help, Michelle's family, Brent's friends, and our friends, we're healing and know we'll be healing till the day we are joined with Brent again.

God does not give us cancer or take someone's life, but even those experiences are not the end when we trust God. Near the end of her book, Kate Bowling says, What if being people of faith meant we are simply people with Good News: Everything happens. God is here. We are loved. God never let's go. That is enough.

Grow, Pray. Study for Week of January 6, 2019

Weekly Prayer: Lord God, thank you that you created all that is, and instead of sitting back to simply watch what would happen, you remain present and express your love for each one of us. Thank you for making your power and wisdom work in our lives, even in the midst of our darkest hours. Amen.

Monday, January 7

Scripture: Galatians 6:7-10

Make no mistake, God is not mocked. A person will harvest what they plant. Those who plant only for their own benefit will harvest devastation from their selfishness, but those who plant for the benefit of the Spirit will harvest eternal life from the Spirit. Let's not get tired of doing good, because in time we'll have a harvest if we don't give up. So then, let's work for the good of all whenever we have an opportunity, and especially for those in the household of faith.

Observation: The phrase "everything happens for a reason" holds a half-truth. In this world, there IS some cause for every effect. But is everything that happens God's will? That is not biblical. Some bad effects, like severe storms, are just "the way life works." Galatians noted that in other cases our choices, not God's acts, cause bad effects.

Application: In the first part of Galatians 6, Paul talked about relationships, about ways the Galatian Christians could help and bless one another. In other words, he talked about choices we control, not natural disasters (such as tornadoes or earthquakes) or diseases nobody "planted." When have you seen your choices, or those of someone close to you, produce (or harvest) one or more negative effects? Were those effects God's doing?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I want to plant love, caring and light through my choices each day. Keep me growing into a person who is mainly a cause of good effects in the lives of others. Amen.

Tuesday, January 8

Scripture: Job 4:1-9

Then Eliphaz, a native of Teman, responded: If one tries to answer you, will you be annoyed? But who can hold words back? Look, you've instructed many and given strength to drooping hands. Your words have raised up the falling; you've steadied failing knees. But now it comes to you, and you are dismayed; it has struck you, and you are frightened. Isn't your religion the source of your confidence; the integrity of your conduct, the source of your hope? Think! What innocent person has ever perished? When have those who do the right thing been destroyed? As I've observed, those who plow sin and sow trouble will harvest it. When God breathes deeply, they perish; by a breath of his nostril they are annihilated.

Observation: Suffering has always raised deep spiritual questions. Job, the Hebrew poetic drama, came from roots that seem to go back more than 1000 years before Christ. The ancient drama showed Job facing awful loss and agony. Though at first his friends sat with him in silence, they soon began to offer simple black-and-white answers to explain his suffering.

Application: Job's friend, Eliphaz, asked him bluntly, "What innocent person has ever perished?" He clearly believed God was the reason for everything bad that had happened to Job, to teach him a lesson for something he'd done wrong. Have you ever asked the same question, inwardly or outwardly, about something bad that happened to you or someone close to you?

Prayer: Lord, Eliphaz held a very simple, black-and-white idea. At times I wish things were that simple. But you taught Job, and want to teach me, to think more deeply about suffering and life. Help me learn from you attentively and perceptively. Amen.

Wednesday, January 9

Scripture: Job 42:1-8

Job answered the LORD: I know you can do anything; no plan of yours can be opposed successfully. You said, "Who is this darkening counsel without knowledge?" I have indeed spoken about things I didn't understand, wonders beyond my comprehension. You said, "Listen and I will speak; I will question you and you will inform me." My ears had heard about you, but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore, I relent and find comfort on dust and ashes.

After the LORD had spoken these words to Job, he said to Eliphaz from Teman, "I'm angry at you and your two friends because you haven't spoken about me correctly as did my servant Job. So now, take seven bulls and seven rams, go to my servant Job, and prepare an entirely burned offering for yourselves. Job my servant will pray for you, and I will act favorably by not making fools of you because you didn't speak correctly, as did my servant Job."

Observation: Starting in Job 38, the drama showed God speaking to Job. God's answer is both beautiful and unsatisfying. God does not explain suffering. Instead, God describes life and reasserts that God is the creator of it all. So we find Job affirming trust in God even when he couldn't fully understand everything. Then God rebuked not Job, but Eliphaz, the others and their simplistic answers: "You haven't spoken about me correctly."

Application: Job realized that he needed more than the "why" answers he had demanded from God – answers he never received. God said Job's friends' answers fell short—"you haven't spoken about me correctly" (Job 42:7). Have well-meaning friends ever given glib explanations of your suffering? How can God's caring presence with you help more than any abstract explanation?

Prayer: Lord God, so many times I think what I want are answers, not realizing that the answers may be beyond my understanding. Thank you for always giving me your love and grace, which are what I most deeply need. Amen.

Thursday, January 10

Scripture: Exodus 34:5-9

The LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him, and proclaimed the name, "The LORD." The LORD passed in front of him and proclaimed: "The LORD! The LORD! a God who is compassionate and merciful, very patient, full of great loyalty and faithfulness, showing great loyalty to a thousand generations, forgiving every kind of sin and rebellion, yet by no means clearing the guilty, punishing for their parents' sins their children and their grandchildren, as well as the third and the fourth generation." At once Moses bowed to the ground and worshipped. He said, "If you approve of me, my Lord, please go along with us. Although these are stubborn people, forgive our guilt and our sin and take us as your own possession."

Observation: In Exodus 32, Israel failed badly, making and worshipping a gold statue of a bull, an Egyptian god (of all things!). In the violent, revenge-oriented ancient Middle East, the Israelites found it hard to grasp what God was really like. Yet, almost like an unexpected harmony in a dissonant symphony, God (unlike Egypt's gods) showed Moses a divine character based on the profound realities of love and forgiveness.

Application: Neither Egyptians nor Canaanites believed their gods loved them. They certainly didn't envision their gods making any good promises to them. Instead, they tended to offer sacrifices mostly to try to stay on their fickle gods' good side, hoping to avoid the gods'

capricious, hurtful actions. Have you ever known (or been) a person who tends to see God in that way? How does that view affect our ability to love or trust God? By contrast, when God revealed his character to Moses, “compassionate and merciful” were the key characteristics in that revelation.

Prayer: Lord God, please give me a thirst to know you better. I’m so thankful that you want to be known, loved, and trusted! Amen.

Friday, January 11

Scripture: Matthew 5:43-45, Luke 11:11-13, 13:1-5

“You have heard that it was said, You must love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who harass you so that you will be acting as children of your Father who is in heaven. He makes the sun rise on both the evil and the good and sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous.

"Which father among you would give a snake to your child if the child asked for a fish? If a child asked for an egg, what father would give the child a scorpion? If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?"

Some who were present on that occasion told Jesus about the Galileans whom Pilate had killed while they were offering sacrifices. He replied, "Do you think the suffering of these Galileans proves that they were more sinful than all the other Galileans? No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did. What about those eighteen people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them? Do you think that they were more guilty of wrongdoing than everyone else who lives in Jerusalem? No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did."

Observation: In Jesus’ day, as in ours, many people were inclined to see tragedy and suffering as a divine punishment and/or object lesson. Jesus consistently said they got it wrong – that is not God’s nature. Jesus recognized the randomness of some tragedies, and the role of evil in creating others. He was not much concerned with assigning blame, but in bringing healing. He taught that, like a good father, God takes delight in giving his children good gifts, not awful, hurtful ones.

Application: Even much of our legal language calls many different kinds of disasters “acts of God.” If, as Jesus suggested, collapsing towers and killings by foreign soldiers are not “acts of God” or divine punishments for wrongdoing, what does cause them? What do you think Jesus would tell a grieving relative of someone killed in tragedies like those?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you came to teach us, and to show us in action, what God is like. When you met sinners, you loved them rather than attacking them. Ingrain in my heart your picture of a God I can trust and serve. Amen.

Saturday, January 12

Scripture: Romans 8:22-28

We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains up until now. And it's not only the creation. We ourselves who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest also groan inside as we wait to be adopted and for our bodies to be set free. We were saved in

hope. If we see what we hope for, that isn't hope. Who hopes for what they already see? But if we hope for what we don't see, we wait for it with patience. In the same way, the Spirit comes to help our weakness. We don't know what we should pray, but the Spirit himself pleads our case with unexpressed groans. The one who searches hearts knows how the Spirit thinks, because he pleads for the saints, consistent with God's will. 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.

Observation: The apostle Paul faced many hardships (which he described in 2 Corinthians 11:22-28). We never find him asking, "Why did God send that mob to attack me?" or anything like that. We never find him sighing, with resignation, "Nero's madness and injustice are just God's will. Everything happens for a reason." But Paul did express a profound trust that even when bad things occur - things God never wished for - God's power could and did force even those bad things to ultimately serve a good end.

Application: Paul wrote in verse 24, "We were saved in hope." It's natural for us to want our faith journey to pay off right now, but in reality it doesn't always do that. To what extent are you willing and able to live in hope, even when the present is different than you would want it to be? Try, like Paul in 2 Corinthians, to list the tough things you've faced. Take that list to God, look for the ways it may have already produced good in your life, and ask God to keep working good for you even out of bad things. In what ways can doing that help to nurture hope in your heart?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for the divine power and ingenuity with which you made the evil of your cross into the central act that saves us from the power of evil. Thank you for promising that your creativity and ingenuity also work in my life. Amen.