

1.

EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR A REASON

[Then Moses said to the Israelites,] I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days.

—Deuteronomy 30:19-20a NRSV

1.

EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR A REASON

Has anyone ever said to you, “Everything happens for a reason”? Most of us have heard that statement from someone at some point. Many of us have said it to someone else.

The statement is true if, in saying it, we mean that we live in a world of cause and effect. Actions create consequences. Our own choices produce results. A result of choosing to text while driving may be a collision in which someone is injured. In the Scripture at the beginning of this chapter, Moses is preaching to the Israelites about cause and effect. Choosing to live under God’s law of love for God and neighbor leads to life and peace for the community.

Usually, however, when we say “Everything happens for a reason” we’re not talking about cause and effect. Most often, we’re speaking in response to suffering. When something bad has happened and we’re trying to help someone through a difficult time, we say “It was meant to be.” When someone dies unexpectedly, we hear “It must have been their time” or “It was part of the plan” or “It must have been God’s will.” We seek to console—and others seek to console us—by saying that God has a particular purpose for bringing about (or at least allowing) situations in which people suffer. We may assume that while we don’t yet understand why it had to happen, all events in our lives unfold according to God’s predetermined and immutable plan. Since God is in charge of everything, whatever happens—a personal setback, an untimely death, a natural disaster—reflects the will and purposes of God.

If we extend this logic, we can arrive at some extremes that seem silly:

- “God meant for my team to win (or lose) the World Series.”
- “Honey, I’m sorry I forgot your birthday. It must have been the will of God.”

And we can get to some very troubling questions:

- “Why would God will millions of Jews to die in the Holocaust?”
- “Does God really want little children to die in a school shooting?”

So, does everything happen for a reason? At best, this is a half truth. I'd love to scrub it from the list of things we say to comfort people when they are going through difficult situations. The notion that God picks winners and losers in professional sports or the stock market, let alone that God intends car accidents, criminal acts, genocide, or mass murder, surely is worth examining.*

The Problem of Personal Responsibility

If we examine the notion that everything happens for a reason, the first problem is that it eliminates the concept of personal responsibility for our actions. If everything happens according to God's immutable plan, then whatever I do must have been God's will.

* Much of what I've written in this chapter I've covered in more detail in my book, *Why? Making Sense of God's Will* (Abingdon Press, 2011). In that book I also address the questions of intercessory prayer and the specificity of God's will for our lives.

God isn't going to change it. In fact, God must have needed and wanted me to do it; otherwise, God would not have let it happen.

If I cheat on my wife, it must have been part of God's plan. If my wife and children suffer because of my cheating, that must have been God's will for them, even if they can't fathom why God ordained it to happen. If I drink and drive and someone is killed as a result, it must have been the victim's "time." Yes, I did a terrible thing, but the devil didn't make me do it. Instead, God used me to accomplish some greater purpose. I cannot be held responsible for my actions; I was only doing what God willed me to do.

The Problem of God's Responsibility

A second problem with the notion that everything happens for a reason is that it makes God responsible for everyone's actions. If God actually intended for everything to happen, then God is responsible for every terrible thing that happens in our world. It would mean that tragedies do not happen in spite of God's will but because of it.

Consider how this idea plays out by taking as examples some news stories I saw the week before I prepared a sermon on this topic.

- A two-year-old unzipped his mother's purse in a Walmart, pulled out a handgun, thought it was a toy, pointed it at his mother, and pulled the trigger. It must have been God's plan for her to die and for the toddler to grow up and go through life carrying the emotional burden of having killed his mother.
- Air Asia Flight 8501 crashed in bad weather, leaving 162 people dead. It must have been each of the passengers' "time." God caused the disaster, and the deaths of everyone on board were a part of God's plan. The grieving of loved ones left behind, too, was meant to fulfill some part of God's plan. There was no point in searching for the airplane's black box. There was nothing to learn from the flight data recorders, because the crash was orchestrated by God. Any improvements in airline safety that might have resulted from learning and applying lessons from this crash

would have been pointless, because the next crash would also be God's will, no matter what safeguards human beings might design.

If this way of thinking is true, then every rape, every murder, every act of child abuse, every war, every terrible storm or earthquake that claims people's lives, every child that dies of starvation—all these are part of God's plan. That is the awful truth we must confront when we buy into the half truth that everything happens for a divinely ordained reason.

The Problem of Fatalism and Indifference

A third problem with the notion that everything happens for a reason, and that whatever happens is part of God's plan, is that it leads to fatalism and indifference. A fatalist thinks, "Whatever is going to happen, will happen. Whatever will be, will be. We are powerless to change it."

If you're a committed fatalist, there is no reason ever to wear a seat belt; if you are meant to die in a car accident, you will. If you are not meant to die, you won't. If you take a fatalistic view, why work out,

eat healthy foods, or take care of your body? After all, when it's your time, it's your time. It won't matter how much you exercise, or whether you eat bacon three times a day. Diagnosed with cancer? If you're a fatalist, don't waste time seeing an oncologist. To seek treatment would be to resist God's will; it was God, after all, who gave you the cancer in the first place. In fact, the entire medical profession, far from being God's instruments of healing, would seem to be working against God's plans. (Perhaps it is worth noting here the relationship between the words *fatal* and *fatalism*.)

Consider how this way of thinking plays out when it comes to politics. Many who believe that whatever happens must have been the will of God suddenly lose this perspective when it comes to politics. Republicans struggle to believe a Democratic president's election was "the will of God." Democrats, likewise, struggle with the idea that a Republican president was God's choice for the office. Do we really believe that everything that happens is God's will?

Or think of sports. Does God really "fix" the outcome of the Super Bowl, the World Series, and the Olympics?

Is this really how things work? Is God calling us to be fatalists?

God's Providence and Sovereignty

Theologians speak of God's purposes and way of working in the world as the doctrine of divine providence. *Providence* is a noun that is closely related to the verb *provide*. The term typically refers to God's governance of the cosmos, including our world and everything in it. Christians believe that God superintends the universe and oversees what happens on our planet.

Closely linked to providence is another attribute of God: divine sovereignty. The word *sovereignty* typically expresses the idea of authority or rule. In any given place, a sovereign is the highest authority. A sovereign depends on no one else for the power to rule. Christians affirm that God's authority encompasses all creation. As our Jewish brothers and sisters say regularly in their prayers, God is "King of the universe." Because God is the ultimate authority, all power and honor, glory and dominion ultimately belong to God.

Though Christians share a belief in God's providence and sovereignty, they often interpret these concepts in very different ways.

Though Christians share a belief in God's providence and sovereignty, they often interpret these concepts in very different ways. Some tend toward a view of God as micromanager, involved intimately each day in every detail of the world's operation. Others believe that God follows a hands-off approach, like an absentee landlord who created everything and then stepped away to let the world run itself. Still others believe the truth is somewhere between the two positions. As a result of these varying interpretations, it's worth taking some time here to look at the contrasting views of how God's rule is carried out.

Calvinism and Theological Determinism

John Calvin (1509–1564) was a brilliant lawyer, theologian, and pastor. He was one of the most important figures in the Protestant Reformation. At age twenty-seven he wrote his book *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which not only was an influential

book in his day, but shaped much of Protestant thinking long after his lifetime. Writing in opposition to Catholicism, he outlined Protestant theology as he conceived it.

One of the defining emphases of Calvin's theology involved his understanding of God's sovereignty. Calvin seemed to believe that for God to be sovereign—that is, to be the highest authority and to have dominion over the universe—then God must will and, in some ultimate sense, *cause* everything that happens. If something happens that is not God's will, Calvin argued, then God does not in fact have dominion over everything. This view is sometimes referred to as theological determinism.

Absolutely everything, Calvin believed, happens by God's will and command. Had science in Calvin's time known about human cells and atoms, he would have said that God was directing creation down to the smallest particles. As Calvin wrote in the *Institutes*, "No wind ever rises or rages without [God's] special command."¹ Every aspect of the daily weather, from thunderstorms to gentle rain and from gales to soft breezes, is decreed by a God who manages everything to the *n*th degree.

It was natural for Calvin to profess that whatever happens in people's lives reflects God's desire and purpose, and in fact there is some scriptural basis for this view. In a time before humans understood weather patterns, people believed that God withheld the rain or gave it. So, for example, we read in Scripture about the punishing drought in Israel during Elijah's time. To someone like Elijah, the weather was not about atmospheric conditions but about God's reaction to the behavior of human beings.

I'm not denying the fact that God could cause the rain or bring storms. In the case of Elijah's drought, this was a direct act of God. Yet this particular episode in Scripture is not meant to teach us about how the weather works, but rather, God's particular judgment on the sins of the Israelites in the ninth century before Christ. Today I believe we're right to question whether the rain, snow, and sunshine are really God's doing, or the result of the complex forces guiding our weather patterns. Our forecasters are not prophets testifying to God's plans for the weather; instead, they examine satellite images and monitor weather patterns to tell us—most of the time, with a

decent degree of accuracy—what our weather will be like tomorrow, the next day, and the next.

Consider another example. Calvin believed that a woman's ability to conceive a child was the result of God's will. This clearly was the view of infertility held by many in Scripture. They frequently noted that God "closed up" or "opened" a woman's womb. Just as Calvin and the Old Testament writers didn't understand the natural forces causing the weather, they didn't understand human fertility or the unseen physiological and biochemical factors that affect pregnancy. Yet for Calvin, even if he had understood these factors they may have made no difference to him. He believed that God's sovereignty requires that everything, including the minute details of physiology and biochemistry, is under God's daily direction.

According to this view, even our thoughts and feelings are governed by God. You might think you've had an original idea, but in Calvin's reality God placed that idea in your mind. You didn't decide to take that job offer or even take out the garbage; God, guiding your thoughts, decided those things for you. Thus for Calvin, everything that happens, for good or bad, is "fixed by [God's] decree."²

One corollary to this view, and the one for which Calvin is especially known, is a particular focus of theological determinism called predestination. Predestination means that God has predetermined everything that happens—that life unfolds according to a script God has written before any of us are born. But one of the implications of this belief is that God has predetermined, before we are born, whether we will accept his salvation or be among the damned.

According to this view, we have no choice about whether or not we will accept the grace of God. Before you were born, you were predestined to be either among the elect or, by not being chosen for election, among the damned. If you are among the elect, God's grace is irresistible to you. No matter how hard you might try to reject Christ, you will be saved. If you are not one of the elect, hell is your certain fate, regardless of how you live your life or how much you desire salvation.

Many Christians struggle with the idea of predestination. The view seems capricious and unjust to many of us. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, taught that God wills all humanity to be saved. Through what Wesley called prevenient grace, God works in human beings to make it possible for us to respond to

God's love and mercy. Some choose to accept God's saving grace while others reject it, but at least this salvation was offered by God to all, and it was God's will that all would receive it.

**Through what Wesley called prevenient grace,
God works in human beings to make it possible
for us to respond to God's love and mercy.**

Theological determinism—the idea that all things happen according to God's plan and will and that God is directing everything—is very appealing to some. In a world where there is much uncertainty, where doubt and questioning are such a prominent part of life, one reaction is a retreat toward absolute certainty. And in a world that seems so out of control, some find it comforting to imagine every detail of life being controlled by the plan and will of God.

As noted, Calvin could claim some scriptural support for his position, and a number of biblical authors clearly saw God's sovereignty in these terms. Often cited in this connection is Matthew 10:29 where Jesus states, "Aren't two sparrows sold for a

small coin? But not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father knowing about it already.” But God’s knowledge of something is different from God’s command that this or that event happen. The overarching message of the Bible does not seem to make God a micromanager directing everything according to his will. Instead, God is more like a parent who invites his children to make their own choices, even knowing they will sometimes make the wrong ones. We see this picture of God from the opening story of the Bible.

God Gives Humanity Dominion

In the story of Adam and Eve, God tells them, “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” (Genesis 1:28). God creates the cosmos, sets the laws in motion by which the universe operates, and then gives humanity dominion, or authority. In other words, God puts people in charge of what happens on earth. Does this mean that God is not still ultimately in charge? Of course not! God remains sovereign but has given us the responsibility to rule over this planet on his behalf.

We see this same theme in the story of the garden of Eden. God places a tree in the midst of the garden and yet forbids the humans to eat from it. Have you ever wondered why God put the tree there to begin with? My own view is that this story is archetypal, and it is meant to teach us that part of being human is having to make choices between doing good and following God's path or turning away from it.

In the Bible, the very word *sin* means to miss the mark or turn from the right path. The tree illustrates the idea that being human means having the freedom to choose either the right path—God's way—or the wrong path. God doesn't determine which choice we will make. Much of the biblical story is about human beings misusing their freedom and turning away from God, and about God's work to clean up the mess.

God has given us freedom to make choices, for better or worse. So when we do something wrong, we can't blame God. We can't excuse a poor choice by saying it was always part of God's master plan. As the Creation story tells us, we are the ones who exercise dominion on God's behalf.

**God has given us freedom to make choices,
for better or worse. So when we do something
wrong, we can't blame God.**

Jesus told a parable that illustrates this point. The story involves tenants who lease a vineyard and operate it in a careless way. When the owner sends his servants to remind the wicked tenants of the owner's sovereignty and ask them to stop abusing the owner's interests, the tenants respond violently. It's clear what Jesus was talking about: human beings are the tenants farming God's earth. We are tending God's creation. God is the owner; the earth belongs to him. We are free as stewards to make choices, and we are responsible for those choices.

The idea of choice is so very important to our theology. Throughout Scripture, God shows human beings the right path and warns against pursuing the wrong path. The passage from Deuteronomy that begins this chapter is an excellent illustration. Through his servant, Moses, God has led the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. As they prepare to enter the

Promised Land, Moses, now an old man nearing death, has just recited the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Law. It's not the first time the Israelites have heard these commandments. But in his sermon to them, Moses reminds them one more time of what God expects of his people.

Then notice what Moses says next. He implores the Israelites,

I call heaven and earth as my witnesses against you right now: I have set life and death, blessing and curse before you. Now choose life—so that you and your descendants will live—by loving the LORD your God, by obeying his voice, and by clinging to him. That's how you will survive and live long on the fertile land.

(Deuteronomy 30:19-20a)

Speaking on God's behalf, Moses is showing the Israelites two paths into the Promised Land. One path leads to life; the other leads to death. One path involves a choice to obey and love God, which also means loving the neighbors made in God's image and seeking to do God's will in the world; the other path involves a choice to live for ourselves, without regard for God or anybody else.