

Christian Cliché Series: “Everything Happens for a Reason”

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Maybe it is a human trait to want life to make sense. We want to know why things happen. We don't like the idea that life can simply be random. I remember some stories that came out of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. There were people who were on their way to work at the towers, but were delayed for some reason. They missed the subway; they had an extra cup of coffee. They weren't in the building when they normally would be, and their lives were saved. I'm sure some thought about that extra cup of coffee, and said, Everything happens for a reason. And if they were a person of faith, maybe they thought, God somehow orchestrated those events to save me.

I get it. We don't want life to be random. We want life to have a certain order to it. We especially don't like it when bad things happen to good people. Life doesn't seem fair when children suffer, or when seemingly good people have a string of unfortunate incidents happen to them.

So sometimes when a terrible thing befalls someone, I'll hear somebody say, somebody who is looking for meaning, “Everything happens for a reason.” And they say this out of kindness. They're trying to comfort the person. Because if this was supposed to happen for some particular reason, then maybe I can start to make sense out of it. If there is a bigger purpose to it, maybe that will help me in my suffering. Everything happens for a reason means random things don't just happen.

And for people of faith, this statement says something about God. Maybe the God of the universe is behind this event, because God has a bigger purpose going on that we don't understand. Everything happens for a reason, and God is aware of that reason. We just don't see that bigger picture yet.

St. Paul uses this logic in describing a tough physical situation that he has to live with. Paul is writing to the church he started in Corinth, and he is concerned about a group of outside missionaries that he thinks are confusing the church. He calls them super-apostles (I think facetiously). These people have visited the church in Corinth, and they are flaunting their credentials, and saying that they are more

spiritual than Paul, the founder of the church. You should listen to our teachings, not that Paul character.

They tell the church that they have spiritual powers made known in ecstasies and visions. And they say to the church, You know Paul isn't very impressive. He writes good letters, but he isn't very impressive in his speech when you see him in person; he's a pretty weak character compared to us.

So in chapters 10-13 of Second Corinthians, Paul takes on these missionaries. His bottom line is that he doesn't believe that faith is shown forth in power; faith is shown forth in weakness. Our weakness gives God a chance to work. At the beginning of chapter 12, he describes a vision that he himself had. He wants the church to know that these super-apostles are not the only ones to have spiritual experiences. He says, "It is necessary to boast; nothing is gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord." These super-apostles have told you how amazing their visions are; so let me share a little bit about me, and what I have experienced.

Here's what he shares, and he does it in the third person: "I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven- whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know- God knows. And I know that such a person- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows- was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations."

Do you notice the back and forth here? I love this about Paul. He really wants to brag a little here about his experience. He knows he will be speaking the truth. But he doesn't want to brag in case somebody really elevates him because of those experiences, and that's not what he wants. He wants them to judge him by who he is, and what he believes, and how he follows Jesus the Christ. And bragging is what his opponents have done, so he doesn't want to stoop to their level.

Remember I said that Paul wants to dispute these opponents' claim to power. He wants to say that God is revealed in him not in these amazing signs and visions but in weakness. So Paul also tells them about a struggle in his life.

“Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated.” We don't know what this thorn in the flesh was: some wonder if he had poor eyesight. You remember that he was blinded on the road to Damascus when he had a vision of Christ, and some wonder if that affected his vision the rest of his life.

Some have wondered if it was seizures, or depression. William Barclay thinks the most logical explanation is that Paul had recurring bouts of malaria that caused blinding, debilitating headaches. Whatever it was, he suffered mightily from it. Now, do you notice that he has a reason for this debilitating condition? Everything happens for a reason, Paul thinks. His interpretation was that the evil one was allowed to give him this thorn in the flesh in order to keep his ego in check.

Now, I'll argue with Paul here. I believe it's ok to wrestle with Scripture. Do you remember when Jacob was fleeing from Esau, and he wrestled with God all night long? And in the morning God named Jacob Israel, which means, the one who strives with God, the one who wrestles with God. So I believe it's ok to wrestle with Scripture.

Maybe that explanation made sense to Paul, that an evil force in the world had been allowed to do him harm to teach him a lesson about humility, but I'm not sure that's why he suffered from malaria or poor vision. And it doesn't mean I need to grab onto that explanation for the suffering I see in the world. When suffering happens to us or a loved one, I don't believe we need to say, Well, everything happens for a reason, so God must be causing me pain somehow.

I don't believe that God tries to control us very much. God is a God of freedom. And the way God has laid out this world, there is cause and effect. If I drink too much and get behind the wheel, I can cause destruction, and I don't need to say, Well, everything happens for a reason, as if God is directing this somehow. No, God gives me the freedom to make choices!

Now, can God use the suffering to create good? Of course! God loves taking the broken pieces and putting them back together. You or a loved one doesn't have cancer because God decided to teach you a lesson in humility: your cells metastasized into something destructive. Can God teach you lessons through that suffering? Of course. Richard Rohr says that we grow the most through great love and great suffering. Suffering is the forge that can form us into more useful vessels. But I don't believe that your suffering was caused by God for the reason that you would be taught a lesson.

Paul says this: "Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me..." Now, that doesn't mean he prayed briefly three times that he would be healed from this; it means three extended periods of prayer, he prayed, and probably fasted, and asked God to remove this thorn in the flesh.

Here's what God said, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."

Paul says that God's power is not made manifest in power, it is manifested in *weakness*. That's Paul's point. It's not about me and what I can accomplish; it's about God's presence and power in me.

Jesus talks about this in Luke 13. Some people come to Jesus and say: Everything happens for a reason, right, Jesus? You saw the headlines the other day, about the Galileans who came to Jerusalem to offer their sacrifices and were killed by Pilate. Pilate, the Roman governor, decided to raid the funds from the Jerusalem Temple to build a new aqueduct. When a group of people gathered in Jerusalem to protest, he sent his soldiers in among them in plainclothes and a number of these protesters were killed. There were probably some Galileans who were part of that, offering their sacrifices.

So people ask him about that incident, with the presumed belief: Everything happens for a reason. They must have been worse sinners than any of the rest of us because they were killed. There was a theology in Jesus' day that said if something

bad happened to you then you had done something to deserve it. If an illness or accident or some other tragedy happened, then you could back up from there and assume you must have done something to deserve it.

This is what is offered as an explanation in the Book of Job. Some terrible things happen to a good man named Job. And his friends come to him and say, Job, I know you say you're a righteous man, but you must have done something to deserve this. You must have done something wrong, Job, to be suffering like this. His friend Eliphaz says to him, Agree with God, and be at peace; in this way good will come to you. (Job 22:21) Just admit that you did something to deserve this.

Don't we ask this question when trouble comes to our life? Am I being punished for something? Is God mad at me?

Jesus unhinges this correlation. He says, Don't look at evil circumstances in this world, and assume that somebody did something to deserve it. He asks, Do you think because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you... They were threatening power, and when you threaten power, power strikes back. There was a cause and effect, but they didn't die because they were worse people than anybody else. But then Jesus says, Unless *you* repent, you will all perish as they did.

And then Jesus comes up with his own example: "Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them- do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you." Pilate had hired some of the local Jewish workers to build the aqueduct, using temple money to pay them, and there may have been a construction accident that killed eighteen of them. And people said, Aha! Everything happens for a reason. They shouldn't have been working on that site, accepting temple money for their wages. God caused that tower to fall on them to punish them! Everything happens for a reason.

And Jesus says, Do you think they were any worse offenders than anybody else living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did. Again, he says, Why are you looking over here at these people, when you need to look at your own life?

The point Jesus makes is, Life happens. Suffering comes our way. I don't believe the question ought to be: Why did God allow this to happen? Or to proclaim, Everything happens for a reason. But we can ask, Now that it has happened, what now? How does God want me to respond in faith? How will God use this for good? And how will God show me that God's grace is sufficient for me? Amen.