Romans 8:28- 39, Genesis 50:20 May 6, 2018

*Half Truths, Part 1*

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*Ancient Words by Michael W. Smith*

Holy words long preserved for our walk in this world
They resound with God's own heart. Oh, let the ancient words impart
Words of Life, words of Hope. Give us strength, help us cope.
In this world, where e'er we roam, ancient words will guide us home.

Ancient words ever true. Changing me and changing you.
We have come with open hearts. Oh, let the ancient words impart.
Holy words of our Faith, handed down to this age,
came to us through sacrifice, Oh heed the faithful words of Christ.

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For the next several weeks we are going to think together about some of the things that Christians and maybe some non-Christians say to one another that seem to be true but may not be entirely, biblically true. What happens is that there is a portion of the phrase that comes from the Bible, but there’s another portion that doesn’t come from the Bible (though it may seem that the whole thing is from God’s mouth to our ears). When you hear the phrases, I think you’ll know what I mean:

1. Everything happens for a reason,
2. God helps those who help themselves,
3. God won’t give you more than you can handle.

Raise your hand if someone has ever said one of those things to you. Raise your hand if you

have ever said one of these phrases to someone else. Probably every adult’s hand should have been up for one or both of those requests. And the thing is, we mean well, don’t we? We mean well. We say these things to try to provide comfort or encouragement to someone going through a hard time. But every time I hear a sister or brother in Christ say one of them, I cringe inside. I cringe because these Christian clichés present a flawed or incomplete picture of the God who loves us with an everlasting love, who is there for us always, and who is ever ready to help us make it through whatever comes our way. So, today we tackle the statement, “Everything happens for a reason.” Let us pray:

 *O great God, Father, Son, & Holy Spirit, teach us. Help us. Open our ears. Open our hearts. If our minds are set on something that isn’t true according to your word, help us to let go of that mind-set and really learn what is written in your word. We want to know your truth in all its fullness so that we can minister most effectively to others in spirit and in truth. This we pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.*

 Let’s look at a familiar Scripture from Romans 8:28-39 as we begin, *“****28****And we know that God causes everything to work togetherfor the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.****29****For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstbornamong many brothers and sisters.****30****And having chosen them, he called them to come to him. And having called them, he gave them right standing with himself. And having given them right standing, he gave them his glory.*

***31****What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us?****32****Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won’t he also give us everything else?****33****Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? No one—for God himself has given us right standing with himself.****34****Who then will condemn us? No one—for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God’s right hand, pleading for us.* ***35****Can anything ever separate us from Christ’s love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death?****36****(As the Scriptures say, “For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep.”*

***37****No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.* ***38****And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,[*[*p*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans%208&version=MSG;NLT#fen-NLT-28116p)*] neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God’s love.****39****No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

 **“And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.”** Somehow out of that, people get “everything happens for a reason.” Because we are told that God works all things together for good for those who love him and who are called according to his purposes for them, somehow that must mean that everything happens so that God can work all things together for good. Meaning that everything happens *for the reason of* bringing more good into the world - which can really be a painful thing for people to be told when they have just watched a loved one die. When we hear that another police officer has been murdered. When cancer strikes. Some people still say that 9/11 happened in order to bring our nation back to God, that that was the reason those planes flew into those buildings, killing everyone on board those planes and so many office workers and first responders. “Everything happens for a reason.” God has a predetermined plan for everything is what is implied.

 So that means God determines the winner of the Super Bowl. That means that God brought Ohio State to victory over Penn State in that season-changing game last Fall. (I have a problem with that. ☹ ). That means it was the will of God that you forgot your wife’s birthday this year. “Sorry honey, I guess it was just God’s predetermined plan that I forgot.” That means that essentially it was God who sent you the rejection letter from the college you wanted to attend, or from the employer you were really hoping to work for, or the ‘dear john’ letter from your girlfriend. That means that the Holocaust that killed 6 million Jewish people was predetermined by God so that some good could come out it. Really? Well, when we say, “Everything happens for a reason,” that the message we’re sending to the other person. Is it true? Does the Bible really say that – *anywhere?*

 Some people look at the Scripture from Genesis 50:20 as a proof-text for this statement “everything happens for a reason.” A proof-text is usually a single verse or two that someone picks out of the Bible to prove their stance or opinion on something. People who are set against women in pastoral ministry pick a verse here and a verse there as proof-texts instead of looking at the whole counsel of Scripture from Genesis 1 to Revelation. So, in Genesis 50:20 when Joseph says to the brothers who sold him into slavery, *“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives,”* they say, “See! Everything happens for a reason.” Proof-texting. But where in that verse does it say that ‘Everything happens for a reason.’ Where does it say that? I can see how you might pull that out of there for Joseph’s situation, but it doesn’t even come close to saying ‘Everything happens for a reason.’

 Words matter. We know that. And so, as disciples of Jesus Christ we should want to only speak what’s true, not fall into these Christian clichés that are easy to say but can cause a heart to ache worse than its already aching. If a person has just received bad news and can’t even think straight, that person doesn’t need someone to say, “Well, just remember, everything happens for a reason,” no matter how gently or compassionately you might say the words.

 Is it true that “Everything happens for a reason?” Meaning by implication that everything happens for God’s good purposes in your life?

 Well, one thing I know is that “everything happens.” Right? Things happen. Good things. Great things. Hard things. Terrible things. In this world, everything happens. But do we see God as a micromanager in everything - like the great and powerful Oz behind the curtain working all the buttons and levers to keep everything in motion just the way He wants? Is God micromanaging everything that happens – for a reason? So why did he give us dominion as written in Genesis chapter 1? Why did he call us to be stewards of all things he made if he is micromanaging? If he is micromanaging everything, why do we do anything at all? If everything is going to come out the way he wants it to – for his good reason – why go to work? Why take our medicine? Why correct our children? Why go to school? Why wear a helmet on our bikes? You see the trouble we’ve gotten ourselves into here?

 Folks, let’s go back to Genesis 50:20. Joseph said to his brothers, *“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good…”.*  Let’s review the story. Joseph was sort of a bratty kid who rubbed it in his brothers’ faces that he was their father’s favorite. They ended up selling him to the Midianites who then sold him to a man named Potiphar, the head of Pharaoh’s security force in Egypt. He did well, but one day was falsely accused of raping Potiphar’s wife. He was put in prison and kept there for two years (for something he did not do!). He was brought out of prison to work for Pharaoh, who saw his potential, and ended up being in charge of the whole land of Egypt. When his brothers came to Egypt to buy some grain because there was a famine in their land, they came face-to-face with the brother they had sold into slavery approximately 13 years before! They were terrified. He had so much power – he could have done just about anything to them! Instead it was to his brothers that Joseph said, *“What you intended for evil, God intended for good….”*

Now here’s something to chew on. The Hebrew word translated *intended* is often also translated *meant.* (What you intended, or what you meant…). But the deep root meaning of the word is *to plait* or (literally) *to weave*. Hmmmm.

Joseph said to his brothers, “You wove evil, but God rewove it together for good.” Think about a piece of twine representing our lives. I picked twine because it’s a little rough with little fibers sticking out from it – sort of like our lives – a little rough and messy. So, life happens. All sorts of everything happens. Purposeful things happen based on the choices we make like Ashley and Aaron getting married next Saturday, like going to college and doing your best, like putting together a meaningful 30-hour famine experience for youth to raise support and awareness for those who live without enough food to eat, like being intentional about gathering together as the church to worship God. The choices we make, makes other things come to pass. Purposeful dominion.

But accidents happen too. We fall and break a bone. Planes crash. We cut our hand with a saw… Accidents. Not ‘on-purpose’ events. Disease happens in this broken world – afflictions of the body and of the mind. All woven together in this one-time gift we have called ‘life on earth.’ What are the reasons for all of these things? One of the reasons is because of the choices we make. The choices we make have consequences, both good and bad. Another reason is because of the natural law of things. Certain things happen because that’s the way things happen. If I let go of a glass, it will fall to the ground and most likely break. If a deer runs into the road at the same time your car is going by, well, you know. Things happen because of the choices we make, things happen because of the natural law of things. Folks, the reason most things happen is because of our choices and because of the natural law of things, not because of what is implied in the statement ‘Everything happens for a reason’ - meaning God is controlling everything that happens. That’s why it’s a half truth. It implies something that is simply not true, and it hurts people when we say it, and it misrepresents God when we say it. But here’s what is true:

 God, in his great love for us, in his great will to bring all things together for good for those who love him and who are called according to his purpose, if we call on him, if we listen to him, if we obey him, if we do things the way he tells us to do them, he will begin to weave something truly beautiful and glorious and good – so, so good – into and around and through our lives. I’m not saying that this takes the grief away or the disease away or all of a sudden, a promotion comes our way or all our bills are supernaturally paid or anything like that. This is not Joel Osteen’s church, folks. We do not preach a “prosperity gospel,” here which declares that “If you do everything God’s way, your life will be materially blessed.” No! But if we are truly following God’s way, in spite of the hardships, God can and will weave into your life a glorious goodness that you simply could not acquire from anyone or anything else. God is at work in all of our lives. He wants our lives to be yielded to his weaving work so that he can bring forth kingdom goodness for us and for the people around us.

 Reverend Adam Hamilton who wrote the book “Half Truths” that I am using as my main reference along with the Bible, of course, writes this (p. 39,40), *“When I think about what it means for God to work in us and through us, I consider what routinely happens in my life. I begin each day praying, “Lord, here I am. Please use me to do what you want with me. Help me to honor you and live for you today.” And then I feel that my mission is to pay attention as I go through the day, to see where God might need me. I seek to be alert to those who are sorrowful or someone who needs help or a situation in which I might make a difference. When I approach the day that way, I have found that God speaks to me, not through some audible voice but through a gentle nudge. And because sometimes I am spiritually hard of hearing, I’m never quite sure whether it’s God who is nudging me or just a random thought that came into my mind. But over time I have come to trust that when I feel that nudge to do something, I should pay attention.*”

 I’ve been thinking about a series of sermons on half-truths for quite some time. I spoke with the worship committee about it several months ago. But I wasn’t sure when the right time would be to deliver it. I was waiting. Praying. Waiting. Thinking it would be good for a summertime series, or maybe in the Fall when things are really kicking back into high gear. And then I sensed that after the stewardship messages over the last several weeks, it was time to go with it. As Rev. Hamilton said, sometimes you aren’t sure if it’s just a thought you have or if is the Holy Spirit speaking to you. I was very hopeful that it was the Holy Spirit. Then on Tuesday morning I was voice-texting Gary while I was on my way to Fulton Co. Medical Center. I was frustrated at Siri because she couldn’t seem to get my message right. Finally, I pared it down to this question, “Do you have a song on your heart that you would like to lead this Sunday?” His response after several minutes, “Ancient Words.”

 He had no idea what the new sermon direction was. But I believe that God, who loves to help us, who desires to be in communication with us, who yearns to strengthen us and uphold us and encourage us, gave Gary that song to let me know that this was the right sermon series for us right now. It brought a renewed peace to my soul. In fact, after all the time I’ve been spending in hospitals lately, it made me cry tears of gratitude that even in my weariness I was still hearing his voice for us.

Did that happen for a reason? Of course. Did God do that? Of course. He nudged me. He nudged Gary. And he’s nudging all of us, all of the time, to see the ways he is working to bring his gracious goodness into any and all moments of our lives. But just because *that* happened for a Godly reason, doesn’t mean *everything* happens for a Godly reason. I’m not going to say the phrase, “Everything happens for a reason” just because God does certain things for certain reasons when he knows we need something. The phrase ‘Everything happens for a reason’ is too broad, folks. It sends the message that our all-powerful God is somehow removed from the reality of our pain and suffering, like he sends something hard into our lives and says, “That hurts? Oh sorry. Get over it. It’s for your good.” We know that’s not the God we read about in the pages of our Bible. Jesus came to share in our suffering. He is not removed from us. He is Emmanuel. He is God with us.

If you’re a young adult or adult, you’ve had some hard times. Some of us have had really hard times. Terrible, heart-wrenching things have happened in some of your lives that break my heart to think about them. I’m not going out on a limb to say what I’m about to say. I’m standing firm on the ancient words preserved and alive yet today. Most of the hardest things that have happened in your life did not happen for some God-ordained, kingdom reason. They happened because they happened. Over time, if you don’t turn away from him in your hurting, God can bring something good from it. He can use your pain to help someone else. He can help you look back and see some of the ways your faith was tested and found wanting, and ways your faith was tested and found true.

When we belong to the Lord through our faith in Jesus Christ, nothing can separate us from the love of God! Nothing! May we allow God to weave beautiful things into the twists and turns of our lives – for his glory and always for the greatest good found in Jesus Christ the Lord. So let’s agree to let the phrase “Everything happens for a reason” fade from use. Instead let’s just hold the hands of the hurting, and maybe not speak at all. Amen.