

- I. An 11-year-old boy is struck down with leukemia. An earthquake strikes the Pacific and kills hundreds of thousands of people. An intoxicated middle-aged woman runs headfirst into a church van full of teens returning from a youth retreat. A thriving business employing thousands of workers loses a big contract and is forced to close its doors. A young mother loses her infant baby to SIDS at three days old. In each of these cases well-meaning people try to comfort the grieving with the age-old aphorism “Everything happens for a reason.” Now let’s take that to its logical conclusion. You go to the hairdresser and instead of hair coming out blond it comes out purple. Your husband cheerfully says as you walk in the door, “Don’t worry honey, everything happens for a reason!” Your child comes home with all F’s on his/her report card and responds, “Don’t get mad, mom or dad! Everything happens for a reason!” You discover your company directly deposited your paycheck into someone else’s account. When you confront the business office they glibly say, “Don’t worry about it, everything happens for a reason.” A pastor neglects to finish his sermon by Sunday so just after his introduction, he just goes over and sits down. When the congregation stirs and someone shouts out, “Is that it??” He responds, “Don’t get upset! Everything happens for a reason!”

- II. Okay, today we continue our Half Truth Series and, as you might have guessed by now, we are tackling the not-so-quite-biblical half-truth, “Everything happens for a reason.” Before I say any more about that let me remind us of the point of this series. I agree whole heartedly with pastor and writer Adam Hamilton who makes a case that some of the half-truths like the one I mentioned and the one pastor Bob spoke on last week, “God helps those who helps themselves,” are not only biblically off, they can be harmful to our understanding of who God is and hurtful to those we speak them to. This is not to say that there is not a kernel of biblical truth in these, but they don’t capture the full intent of Scripture and the complete heart of our Heavenly Father. As we explore these I am fully aware that what I say may fly in the face of what you have believed for years. Like Hamilton, I admit that I can be wrong. But before you jump to that conclusion I ask that you at least hear me out or better yet, listen for God’s truth in my inadequate words. And go home, study the Scriptures, read what other Christian thinkers believe, and talk to other mature Jesus followers before making your final decision. And what you will find in every case...I am right! Just kidding!

- III. I don’t know about you but I want to confess as we begin that I have said “everything happens for a reason” before. Here is the thing. If we are simply suggesting that God is ultimately in control and that He can use all things in our lives for His purposes then this isn’t a half-truth at all but, I believe, the full truth. But that really isn’t what this statement is implying, is it? Rather it suggests that everything that happens during our day, from a fender bender at the mall to us forgetting to put our washed laundry into the dryer, is Divinely ordained and orchestrated and there is meaning behind it. So what’s the problem? We will get to Scripture here in a bit but let’s look at where this logic takes us. First, it removes all personal responsibility. **If God is responsible for everything, we are responsible for nothing**, right? Going back to my example at the beginning with the kid who gets all “F”s on his or her report card. If God is behind every action, deed, and event, then that child’s parent shouldn’t get on his/her case, right? Or

if I stole the church offering and went and bought me a full-length fox fur coat and you confronted me I could say, "Well everything happens for a reason! I am not a thief it's all part of God's grand plan." See how this kind of thinking weakens if not removes personal accountability? But perhaps this is not the biggest problem with this half-truth.

- IV. The second problem is that it **puts God on the hook for not only the good but all the bad too**. We just celebrated God becoming flesh and entering our world as a vulnerable baby boy who would one day grow into a man that not only taught us to love our enemies but died for His enemies too. Are we to believe this God of love, of mercy, of compassion is the one who is behind the terrorist attack in Istanbul, Paris, and Orlando? Or is the cause behind 8 million Jews, Gypsies and mentally handicapped men, women and children being murdered by Hitler? Or behind the man who shot a 3-year-old boy who was innocently riding in his car with his Grandmother? **If everything is divinely orchestrated it's inconsistent if we just give Him credit for the good and let Him have a pass for the evil.** But here is the final problem with this way of thinking.
- V. As Hamilton points out, **why bother?** I mean if we are nothing more than a puppet on a string at the mercy of a divine puppeteer, why go to the doctor if we going to get better or not regardless, why eat broccoli or brussels sprouts if we are going to get a heart attack or not, why quit smoking, stop drinking to excess, why vote when the outcome has already been predetermined, or sky dive without a backup parachute if what is going to be will be? This way of thinking is called fatalism...like fatal as in death. Not only is it unbiblical and depressing it is also, no offense, plain dumb. If I walk out of here right now, get in my car and shut my eyes and attempt to drive to the mall, I am not resigning myself to the will and providence of God, I am just being an idiot. Not only risking my life but the lives of many others too.
- VI. Now at this point you might be saying, "Well wait, Ron. The bible says that God is in control, right? You have preached it, taught it and we sing about it all the time." Let's look at only a few of many verses that back this up. **Psalm 135:6; 1 Chronicles 16:31; Isaiah 46:10 (all NIV)**. All three of these verses are talking about the sovereignty of God, which means God's rule or authority. This is where we get the word sovereign like king or queen. So aren't these verses saying that God is in complete control of His creation? Well let's pause for a moment and consider this. You might know that Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy ruled today by King Salman (**image**.) He has complete control over the police, the military, and all forms of government. Let's pretend for a moment that we all live in Saudi Arabia. Does this mean that King Salman controls when we wake up, eat breakfast, use the restroom or speed on our moped on the way to work? No, he might be the ultimate authority but it doesn't mean that he controls every action or decision we make, right? What I am getting at is how do we understand God's reign?
- VII. Let me tell you about a guy named Calvin. Not Calvin Kline, Calvin and Hobbes, or Calvin Harris, but John Calvin. (**image**) John was a brilliant theologian who lived about 500 years ago, mostly in Switzerland despite being French. Why? Because the Catholic church wanted him dead. This was the time when both the Protestant and Catholic

churches didn't play nice. Instead of talking their differences over in a Starbucks they preferred to put each other on a rack or burn the other at the stake. The "good old days" they were not. Anyway, John Calvin developed a brilliant systematic theology, or a comprehensive way of understanding God, that has helped millions of Christians over the years. But one aspect of his teaching has been controversial since the beginning. He taught that humanity is so broken and sinful that on our own we simply won't choose to accept and follow Jesus. So the only way anyone can be redeemed is if God, out of His Grace, chose some to save while allowing others to be damned or cut off from God forever. And with this kind of thinking came the doctrine of Christian determinism, or the idea that God controls everything. While at Furman University I attended a church for a short time that held this belief strictly. I distinctly remember the pastor saying the following, "As you walked in on the sidewalk here this morning God determined where you stepped and where you didn't. He decided which ant you stepped on and which one you didn't as He guided your feet to this place." Poor ants didn't have a chance if God was after them! Can you see how this way of understanding God leads us to all the problems I mentioned? Some might respond, "Well, that is the God of Scripture. Just because you don't like it doesn't make it any less true. I wish excessive amounts of Ben and Jerry chocolate brownie ice cream was good for me but that doesn't change the fact it is not." My response? For every Scripture that you can offer as proof of Calvinism, I can offer another to counter it. And most importantly we need to read the entire bible through the lens of Jesus and the entire biblical story.

VIII. Let me tell you about a different theologian named John who I personally believe has captured a more accurate view of the God of the bible. John Wesley lived a couple hundred years later than Calvin. He believed that humanity was broken and sinful like Calvin but he also believed God gave us the grace to respond to Him with our own free will. And that God doesn't only save a select few but all those who respond to Jesus in faith. Although He desires all to be saved He doesn't force anyone. He still taught that God is the king of the world but He is a king that allows His subjects the freedom to follow His law of love or not. Wesley's way of understanding God cut the puppet strings. He still believed God's ultimate will eventually will come to pass, that evil will be vanquished, but he believed our actions can help bring this about. So every day I have to make moral choices that have far reaching impact...like a pebble thrown in the middle of a still pond. Like a story I was reading the other day about a mechanic who decided to reach out to a 19 year old drug dealer living in his car. He offered to teach this wayward teen how to fix cars for free. Now years later instead of ending up either in prison or dead, this ex-drug pusher works an honest job and can have a family with children, all of which probably would have never existed without a middle aged mechanic willing to be God's hands and feet. Again our moral choices, good or bad, have far reaching consequences beyond our imagination. I think theologian John gets it right.

IX. So we might ask at this point where does this half-truth come from in the Scripture. It's probably an amalgam of verses but the one that is closest at least in my opinion is Paul's words to the **Romans 8:28 NIV**. On YouTube you can find a lot of garbage but there is some comedic gold as well. You might have heard of this. Bad Lip reading. It's where

they take a movie, a sports event or even a political debate and dub over the real words with what is essentially nonsense...what my wife and I find very funny nonsense. So despite what the actor, player or presidential candidate said in real life you hear something absolutely different. I think if we are not careful we can do the same thing with this verse. Take Paul's words and replace them with our own...like "ah he is basically saying everything happens for a reason." But he is not. Not one bit. Instead in his entire letter to the Romans he is saying that God designed the world and all of creation perfectly; and we humans, because of our selfish and disobedient ways, messed it up. But God through Jesus is now redeeming it or setting it straight. And God can use all types of experiences in our life to transform us and those around us into the people He desires us to be. Paul is absolutely not saying that God is behind any and every action...especially the evil. Sure God can redeem the bad in our life if we love Him but He is not its author.

- X.** So what difference does all this make besides the obvious that I shouldn't spout off "everything happens for a reason" the next time tragedy strikes a friend or a family member? I'd like to close with a video clip. I warn you this is going to be hard to watch. If there are young children, you probably want to cover their eyes. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l0ODw2L-XpQ> 1:40-2:00 I know that was painful to watch. Kidding let's watch the real clip. And I am serious this time. You may want to cover the kids eyes. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-_Y53soC8ro (whole thing)
- XI.** Here is where I am landing this morning on this half-truth. I believe "everything happens for a reason" is bad lip reading of Paul's words and a misrepresentation of Scripture as it suggests in this case of the two boys that God was behind the dresser falling on the one brother. My understanding of God as best revealed by the life and teachings of Jesus is not a God who pushes the dresser. He is not the one who pulls the trigger. Or the one who causes someone to drink and get behind the wheel. But I do believe He could have given that brother the strength to pick up that dresser. I believe He is the one who gives us the strength to go on after facing the death of a loved one or a broken relationship. I believe He is the one who, if we are willing to follow His path in our life, can bring healing and hope to this fallen world.