

Myth #6: Everything Happens for a Reason

Romans 8:17

Are self-inflicted wounds God's doing? Can a bad thing be a good thing?

Over the past couple of years there has been a popular pair of movies called “Transformers.” The plot of these movies is that there are two types of aliens which have invaded Earth. The one alien force is called the “Decepticons”. These are an evil group of machines whose whole goal is to annihilate everything in their path. The other aliens are called “Transformers” who are dedicated to protecting the very things the Decepticons are focused on destroying. Their conflict mirrors the truths of Scripture. While deception is one of Satan’s principle weapons God has as one of His principle tools that of transformation.

I believe we can be easily deceived by our own wishful thinking when it comes to explaining why things happen – especially – why bad or difficult things happen. We want to say, “It’s going to be OK.

There have been many times in my life when someone has told me, “It’s going to be OK.”

When we went to Zimbabwe and I had to leave behind my only true love Libby Johnson.

When I was dropped off at Boarding School over 300 miles and a day and a half’s journey from home and family.

When my friend was electrocuted during a game of hide and seek on a beautiful cricket field in balmy summer weather.

When, at the age of 13 I was sent with a crew of workers to keep a wild fire from devouring the south side area of the mission station.

I could go on but you are probably remembering your own, “it’s going to be ok” moments.

Eventually, it was ok. Not great. Not even good in some cases, but, ok. It was rarely easy and often required effort and loss, but, it was ok.

During these times it is tempting to look for a reason. Maybe you have heard some of the well meaning responses during those times:

Well Meaning But False Condolences

- **God must be up to something**
- **God doesn’t make mistakes.**
- **You must be very special for God to trust you with this.**
- **Won’t it be great to see how God uses this?**
- **Isn’t it good to know that everything happens for a reason?**

I do not believe God caused Lucifer to rebel, Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, or David to sleep with Bathsheba. He did not kill Abel, build the tower of Babel, or force the crowd to cry out for Barabbas. Those who carried out these evil deeds bear full responsibility for their actions. They can’t blame God, Adam tried and God was having none of that shovel load.

Romans 8:28 is often used as the proof text for there being a God reason for everything that happens. However, like all scripture, verse 28 exists within a context which is vital to understanding the entire passage. So before we get to the “all things good” part let’s look at the “we must suffer” part.

There is no Justice on Earth

Romans 8:1-2

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.

When Paul talks about the law he refers to three different laws. His most common reference is to the Mosaic Law (that is what he is referencing here), then the natural law which is not of the Spirit and finally the law of the Spirit. He often intertwines the Mosaic with the natural as the Mosaic Law was God's effort to keep Israel a separate nation so He addresses the things in the natural law that separate people from Himself. Following the Mosaic Law keep us separate from the natural law and all those who live by it – however – it is impossible to keep that law.

Paul says it was impossible for the law to do what it was supposed to do because it was always defeated by the natural law. Where the law of Moses required unity the law of our natural selves requires separation. Where the law of Moses required purity and transparency the law of our natural selves requires expediency and ambiguity.

I can never find justice when what I want is my piece of the pie. My life can never always have a happy ending. Life is just too unfair, requires too much sacrifice and relies on the fallen world for its outcomes.

In his best-selling book *The Reason for God*, Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian in Manhattan, shares the story of a woman in his congregation who was learning how the grace extended to us through Christ's work on the cross can actually be more challenging than religion. He writes:

Some years ago I met with a woman who began coming to church at Redeemer and had never before heard a distinction drawn between the gospel and religion [i.e. the distinction between grace and what is often a works-based righteousness]. She had always heard that God accepts us only if we are good enough. She said that the new message was scary. I asked why it was scary and she replied: If I was saved by my good works then there would be a limit to what God could ask of me or put me through. I would be like a taxpayer with "rights"—I would have done my duty and now I would deserve a certain quality of life. But if I am a sinner saved by grace—then there's nothing he cannot ask of me."

She understood the dynamic of grace and gratitude. If when you have lost all fear of punishment you also lose all incentive to live a good, unselfish life, then the only incentive you ever had to live a decent life was fear. This woman could see immediately that the wonderful-beyond-belief teaching of salvation by sheer grace had an edge to it. She knew that if she was a sinner saved by grace, she was (if anything) more subject to the sovereign Lordship of God. She knew that if Jesus really had done all this for her, she would not be her own. She would joyfully, gratefully belong to Jesus, who provided all this for her at infinite cost to himself.

Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (Riverhead Books, 2008), pp. 189-190

3 For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, 4 in order that the righteous requirements of the law

might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

5 Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. 6 The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; 7 the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. 8 Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.

9 You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. 10 But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. 11 And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.

Suffering is our Circumstance but Hope is our Condition

Romans 8:17 & 26-27

Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

12 Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. 13 For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, 14 because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. 15 For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." 16 The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. 17 **Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.** 18 I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. 19 The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. 20 For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. 23 Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? 25 But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

26 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. 27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

Now, sometimes we suffer in this life because we deserve to. We've made bad decisions.

But a lot of times, Christians suffer because we live in an evil world, and the pain in our lives is caused by the evil THAT IS IN this world.

And especially because we belong to God, our enemy is Satan, and Satan hates God so much that he'll try to hurt us whenever and wherever he can.

The bad news is: We don't get a choice – if we stand for Jesus we WILL suffer.

The good news is: We do have a choice in how we respond to that suffering.

In his old age, the great French painter Renoir, suffered from arthritis. The disease twisted and cramped his hand.

One his artist friends, Henri Matisse, watched sadly while Renoir, grasping a brush with only his fingertips, continued to paint, even though each movement caused stabbing pain. One day, Matisse asked Renoir why he persisted in painting at the expense of such torture.

Renoir replied, "The pain passes, but the beauty remains."

Renoir couldn't avoid his suffering... but he did chose how responded to it.

We are Predestined to Persevere

Romans 8:28-30

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

Predestination is not a sentence but a promise

31 What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?

32 He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? 33 Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is he that condemns?

Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of

God and is also interceding for us. 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

In 1991, a fire raged through Oakland, CA destroying a number of houses in its path.

One of those homes it belonged to a preacher. His home was totally destroyed, reducing most of the family's possessions to little more than burnt ashes.

But one item did survive intact: a small porcelain rabbit figurine.

The next Sunday, the preacher took the item into the pulpit and explained his recent loss. holding up the small figurine, he noted that it was the sole surviving keepsake from the fire

and he dwelt on the unusual fact that it alone survived the flames.

Why, he asked, would this small item escape damage when nothing else did?

He smiled and said: "Because it had already been through a fire once."

When we look for a reason to life's vagaries we are hoping to find we have not gone through hurt without cause and can now have peace in our daily lives. However, we might be better served if we look for shalom rather than peace.

We are promised Shalom not Peace

Romans 8:37-39

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The foundation of almost every Hebrew word is a root composed of three consonants, and each root has its own fundamental meaning. The other letters that fill in around the three-consonant root to make a word can be varied in many ways to make other words. However, something of the basic meaning of the root always remains in the meaning of all the other words. The root of the word shalom is sheen-lamed-mem (šly), transliterated in English as SH-L-M. Its basic meaning is "wholeness" or "completeness." Literally hundreds of Hebrew words are built from the root SH-L-M, and all of them have some connection to this basic meaning. For example, ShaLeM means "complete," and is also the name of the city of Melchizedek mentioned in Genesis 14:18 (transliterated in English as "Salem"). SheLeM means "peace offering," which was part of restoring a broken relationship with God; SheeLeM means "he paid," that is, he completely fulfilled his obligation.

Hebrew is very efficient and has a relatively small vocabulary, approximately one-tenth that of English. One word can often serve a variety of functions. One sees this with the word shalom, which is usually translated as "peace," but means more simply "tranquility" or the opposite of war. A quick look at a number of Bible passages shows other meanings of the Hebrew word shalom - meanings that have not always been conveyed well in translations in other languages. In some of the references you may not see the connection, but the word shalom is present in the Hebrew. (Clarence H. Wagner, Jr, International Director – www.peacebeuntoyou.blogspot.com)

The hymn "It is Well" was written after several traumatic events in the life of Horatio Spafford, a Chicago lawyer and businessman. The first was the death of his only son in 1871, shortly followed by the great Chicago Fire which ruined him financially. Then in 1873, he had planned to travel to Europe with his family on the SS Ville du Havre, but sent the family ahead while he was delayed on business concerning zoning problems following the Great Chicago Fire. While crossing the Atlantic, the ship sank rapidly after a collision with a sailing ship, the Loch Earn, and all four of Spafford's daughters died. His wife Anna survived and sent him the now famous telegram, "Saved alone." Shortly afterwards, as Spafford traveled to meet his grieving wife, he was inspired to write these words as his ship passed near where his daughters had died.

The Spaffords later had three more children, one of whom (a son) died in infancy. In 1881 the Spaffords, including baby Bertha and newborn Grace, set sail for Israel. The Spaffords moved to Jerusalem and helped found a group called the American Colony; its mission was to serve the poor. The colony later became the subject of the Nobel prize winning Jerusalem, by Swedish novelist Selma Lagerlöf.

It is only in Shalom where friendship, well being, safety and salvation meet in the person of Christ Jesus. We will not find an answer to life in our personal strength or beauty. We will not find the answer to life in our skill or our intellectual prowess. We will not find the answer to life in our success or hard work. We will not find the answer to life in our bank accounts or retirement funds.

People have not gathered on Easter for the past 2,000 years to say, "The stock market has risen. It has risen indeed." They have not risen before sunrise to greet each other with, "The dollar has risen. It has risen indeed." Or, "the employment rate has risen." Or, "the gross domestic product has risen." Or, "General Motors has risen." Or, "The value of your 401(k) has risen." Here's the one hope that has held up human beings across every continent and culture for two millennia of difficult times of poverty, disease, pain, hardship, [and] death itself: "Christ is risen. He is risen indeed." John Ortberg, in the sermon "Resurrection: Metaphor or Miracle?" Menlo Park Presbyterian Church (Menlo Park, CA) (preached 4-12-09)

Other scripture references:

John 16:33; Acts 14:22; Peter 4: 12-13; I Corinthians 11:24-27; James 1:2-4; Psalm 66:10; Psalm 103