**Bumper Sticker Theology – Week 3 – Everything Happens for a Reason**

**Message Big Idea**: God can use everything that happens for a reason.

**Scripture:** Matthew 10:28-29, Genesis 1:28, Genesis 3:1-7, Romans 8:28

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**Introduction: Kids Ask Why?**

I will never forget a conversation I had with my oldest nephew, Andrew, many years ago when he was just a little guy. My sister had just given birth to my younger nephew, and Andrew and I were on the way to the hospital to meet his little brother for the first time. My family lives in Ohio, but this birth was a planned C-section so I was able to arrange my schedule to be there.

Andrew was in the **“Why?”** stage of childhood during this season… you know, the phase a child goes through where they are constantly asking, “Why?” How many of you have lived through the “Why?” phase with a child? At first it can be so cute.

“Why is the sky blue?” Awww, she is so inquisitive.

“Why do dogs have fur?” Awww, he is so curious.

Well, as Andrew and I were discussing the excitement of meeting his baby brother, I said, “I’m so glad I can be here today…” and Andrew asked, “Why?”

“Well,” I told him, “I wasn’t able to be here on the day you were born.” And, of course, his reply was, “Why?”

“Because, Andrew, we didn’t know what day you were going to be born, this time we knew what day your little brother was coming.” …”Why?”

“Well, because your little brother wasn’t born in the way babies are naturally born.” …”Why?”

And, you guys, because I’m not a parent and didn’t know to just reply with a loud, “Because!” to end this discussion, I found my self explaining the processes of natural childbirth to a poor little child who was horrified and a bit green when we finally arrived at the hospital!

Children are so inquisitive and just trying to make sense of a crazy world when they ask the question, “Why?” And I think it’s a question we never outgrow.

**Series Recap**

We’re in week 3 of our series Bumper Sticker Theology. Each week we’ve taken a common phrase that Christians say and asked, **“Is it Biblically sound or just sound Biblical?”** Most of these sayings have enough truth in them to make them believable, but for the most part they are trite clichés that contradict the larger arc of Biblical teaching.

And the phrase we’re going to approach today is probably the one I hear the most, and to be honest, in the past, I have even said it myself. But I have come to understand that not only is this phrase not Biblical, in some cases it can be quite hurtful. The popular bumper sticker saying we’re talking about today is: **“Everything Happens for a Reason.”**

**Reasons We Say It**

How many of you have either heard or said this phrase? Yeah, almost all of us. It’s probably the most repeated of all the bumper sticker sayings. So, why do we say it?

Honestly, I think sometimes we say it just because **we’ve heard it said**. We hear other people say it, and so when someone we know is going through a hard time, we say it without much thought.

Usually, we say it to be **encouraging**.

* If your friend doesn’t get the job after the interview or…
* If your teenager gets dumped right before senior prom or…
* If your sibling misses out for the 247th time on the daily drawing for free *Hamilton* tickets…

We say, “Everything happens for a reason,” as a way to try to lift that person’s spirit.

Often we say this bumper sticker saying because we’re **trying to find meaning in the middle of pain**. Hard things happen that we don’t understand. Yet, somehow if we believe “Everything happens for a reason,” we can trust that there is a meaning even if we can’t see it yet.

Honestly, I think sometimes we say it just because we don’t know what else to say.

And, frankly, sometimes it helps. If you get fired from your job but then end up landing an even better job with a higher salary, it’s easy to say, “Everything happens for a reason!” Right?

But what about…

When someone you know experiences a tragic accident?

When someone you care about receives a devastating diagnosis?

When someone you love is the victim of a violent crime?

When someone, like my friend Sharie from our Naperville location, faces unimaginable circumstances.

**Video: Sharie’s Story-Part 1**

*Sharie tells her story of being home one morning with her husband who was recovering from a stem cell transplant surgery in the middle of a 2-year battle with cancer. There is a thunderstorm outside and as she is getting ready, they hear a loud boom. Turns out their house had been hit with lightening and was on fire. Sharie stood in the pouring rain with her young daughter and sick husband and watched their house burn down.*

What would you say to Sharie as she stood with her ill husband in the pouring rain watching their house burn down? “Everything happens for a reason?” Perhaps the circumstances are different, but maybe you are here today and you know what it’s like to feel that level of pain. *(pause and go slow)* It’s hard to make any sense out of circumstances like that. What do we do with stories like this?

**Determinism**

Let’s take a step back for a minute from this bumper sticker saying to ask ourselves: What are we *really* saying when we say, “Everything happens for a reason”? Behind this saying is the belief that that everything that happens is God’s will. Even though we often don’t understand what the reason is in the moment, we believe that if something happened, God has his reasons, and in time we hope we will understand those reasons.

This belief that everything that happens is God’s will is called **Determinism**. Determinism says, *(add)* **“Nothing happens without the determination of God.”** After all, we believe in an all-powerful, almighty God who is the ruler of heaven and earth. For God to be sovereign, he *must* have control over everything. And if he is controlling everything, then we trust that he has good reasons for determining what happens to you and what happens to me.

And there are lots of reasons why determinism *“sounds”* Biblical. One passage that seems to hint at it is in Matthew chapter 10. In this passage, Jesus is sending out his disciples to heal the sick and drive out demons while preaching the message about his Kingdom. He knows they are going to face opposition. He knows they will face imprisonment and even public beatings. So he says to them:

***“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care.” –Matthew 10:28-29***

He’s saying, “Don’t be afraid of people! Their power doesn’t even compare to the power of your mighty heavenly Father!” And then he reassures them saying, “You are far more valuable than birds and yet not even one of them falls to the ground without God’s care.”

Some have read these words about the sparrows and taken them to mean that nothing happens in the world without God’s involvement. He is involved in every detail, even a single bird falling to the ground. God controls every occurrence in the universe.



In this view, we might see God as the *(Picture)* grand puppet master. He is the one pulling all the strings.

* When your computer at work fails and your stuck in the office for long hours catching up, it was God pulling on the technology string that day.
* When you blow a tire on the way to school, God was pulling on the car string.
* When a Nickelback song comes on the radio, God was…no, I can’t go there. I can’t blame that on God.

But you see, that’s exactly the problem with determinism. Determinism blames God for everything. To say that everything that happens is God’s will eliminates the concept of personal responsibility for our own actions.

* If I run a red light, it must have been God’s will.
* If I steal from my employer, it must have been God’s will.
* If I cheat on my spouse or boyfriend or girlfriend, it must have been God’s will.

Determinism eliminates personal responsibility, and it makes God responsible for everyone’s actions. Just think for a moment about what that means. Can you see why this view is so dangerous? If God determines everything that happens, then every rape, every murder, every act of injustice are part of God’s plan. *(pause)*

Who could blame someone for rejecting a God who caused these things?

Let me just pause for a second and speak to those who have or are enduring unthinkable circumstances. If someone has said the words, “Everything happens for a reason,” to you in your deepest pain, I’m sorry. We both know that person was probably well meaning, but don’t think for a moment that God desired whatever happened to you or to someone you love. His heart breaks where your heart breaks. I want you to know today that he is good, and he loves you. *(pause)*

**Dominion**

So, are we saying that God has no control over anything that happens? No. That would contradict so much of the Biblical narrative describing times God does directly intervene in our world, including when he chose to come himself in the person of Jesus. Though it is mysterious to us, at certain times and in certain places, God does choose to directly intervene in what happens in our world.

But to even begin to attempt to understand why so many bad things happen, we have to understand the concept of **Dominion**. And to understand dominion, we have to go back to the beginning.

*(Genesis 1:1-5)* When God created the world, he created everything, bringing order out of chaos. In the creation account, each day he creates, sees that this creation is good, and concludes the day. The structure he brings to the world is a display of God’s good order. Everything he makes is good, and, as Creator, he has dominion over it all.

*(Genesis 1:26-27)* Then, at the pinnacle of creation, God creates human beings in his image. He creates people to *(highlight)* **rule** over the rest of creation. He tells them to rule over the fish and the birds and every animal on the land. He gives them plants and trees to use for food. In essence, God gives people a special and awesome responsibility to share in his dominion over creation and continue his good order.

The Psalmist tries to capture the wonder of this truth when he declares:

***“What is mankind that you are mindful of them,***

 ***human beings that you care for them?***

***You have made them a little lower than the angels***

 ***and crowned them with glory and honor.***

***You made them rulers over the works of your hands;***

 ***you put everything under their feet:***

***all flocks and herds,***

 ***and the animals of the wild,***

***the birds in the sky,***

 ***and the fish in the sea,***

 ***all that swim the paths of the seas.” –Psalm 8:4-8***

God created us in his image and chose to share his dominion with us! He didn’t want robots. He wanted relationships with people he could love as we live in this world with him.

Of course in granting this blessing, God took a tremendous risk: Would people use the dominion he gave them to carry out his good order? Or would they choose their own way, defining their own “good?”

This question gets answered quickly.

*(Genesis 3:1-6)* When the serpent confronts Eve in the garden, he tempts her to question the goodness of God. He challenges the notion that God’s good order is really in her best interest. He encourages her to evaluate for herself what is “good.” And so Eve exercises her own dominion, the dominion God had granted her, and Adam joins her in this and they make a choice that goes against God’s good order.

This early story establishes a pattern that has repeated itself over and over and over again. Right down to me. And the selfish, Tammy-dominion choices I make.

This reality leads us to this sobering truth: **Not everything that happens is God’s will.** *(pause and repeat)* Many choices are made that go against God’s good order. In fact, that’s why Jesus himself taught us to pray to the Father:

***“…your kingdom come,***

***your will be done,***

 ***on earth as it is in heaven.” –Matthew 6:10***

Jesus urged us to pray for God’s will to be done on earth because God’s will isn’t always done on earth as it is in heaven. And the fact that God’s will isn’t always done on earth means that: **Not everything happens for a reason.** God is not behind many of the things that happen in this world.

* Sometimes things happen because we have exercised our dominion and made choices that aren’t in line with God’s good order.
* Sometimes things happen because someone else has exercised their dominion.
* Sometimes things happen because whole societal systems have been created that go against God’s good order.

And sometimes...there is no recognizable, explainable reason for why something happens at all.

Now, let me pause once again because I’m sure I’m rattling some of you. The saying, “Everything happens for a reason” is so prevalent that of all the bumper sticker sayings, this might be the one we have a hard time letting go of. But let me assure you… We don’t have to be afraid. We don’t have to lose heart. Because no matter what happens in this life, know this for sure: We have hope.

**The Hope**

We have hope…and his name is Jesus!

Jesus entered our corrupted world to usher in a new age where God’s good order would be restored. Through his death and resurrection, he defeated this corruption and the evil powers behind it and set in motion God’s plan to redeem the world. Yes, we live in the time when this redemption has begun yet is not yet finished, but we have his promise that one day everything will be made right. One day there will be… *(Revelation 21:4)*

* No more death.
* No more mourning.
* No more crying.
* No more pain.

For this old world and its corruption will pass away and we will live in a new world governed by God’s good order that will never spoil and never fade away.

That is the hope that we have! And until that hope is fully realized, we have this promise:

***“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.” –Romans 8:28***

Not everything happens for a reason, but *(add)* **God can use everything that happens for a reason.** *(repeat)*He can take even the most twisted, most painful things we experience in this life…and bring good from them. He can bring beauty from ashes, light from darkness, hope from despair. That doesn’t necessarily mean life will get easier in this world. But whether God works these things for the good in this life or the next, he will work them for good. That is the hope, the eternal hope, we have in Jesus. *(Hard cut right to the video)*

**Video: Sharie’s Story-Part 2**

*Sharie reflects on losing her husband to cancer and all about that season of her life that she still doesn’t understand. But she concludes with this hope: “Here’s what I do know. When life had me pinned on my face and to the ground, it was the love of God that picked me up. It was the love of God that gave me strength to hold my husband’s hand when he took his last breath. It was the love of God that comforted me when I was overwhelmed with grief. It is the hope of Jesus that helped me begin to live life again and life to the full. It is because the hope of Jesus that the narrative of disease and disaster does not have the final say. In the gospel John 16:33 Jesus says, ‘…In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.’ And I believe that to be true.”*

**Conclusion**

Let me conclude today by speaking to those of us who are suffering, those who are heart-broken, those who are in pain. I don’t know why what happened, happened. I’m sorry if we have ever spouted off bumper sticker sayings that may have added to your pain rather than comforted it.

You might feel alone. You might feel abandoned. But I simply want you to know there is a God who loves you, who is with you, and who cares about you more than you could ever understand. And he will work everything for your good. You can have hope, eternal hope, in him.

May we learn to sit with one another in our pain. To let go of the need to explain it. To be silent together. To cry with one another. To mourn with one another. To pray for one another.

In fact, I want to end this message with a time of prayer…to pray over those wrestling right now with that question, “Why?” If that is you, we are here with you. And we come together before our Father this morning on your behalf. Let’s pray.

*Option: Use the Prayer Team in this moment to pray over people.*

**Communion Idea**

*(John 16:33)* As Sharie said, in John 16:33 Jesus says, “…In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

To give you some context for this verse. Jesus says this after he has given the disciples a long list of trouble they may encounter. And this list of troubles begins back in chapter 15 and continues through chapter 16. His disciples begin to ask, “Why?” “Why?”

And then Jesus tells them plainly what is about to happen to him. He tells his followers that he is going to be leaving them, that he is going to be betrayed and that their mourning will be great. And then he says But soon you’ll be fully of joy, so full of joy you will be no longer be full of questions. He says I tell you these things so you will trust me. Trust Jesus.

Trust Jesus when he says. In this world you WILL have trouble BUT, take heart, have HOPE. Jesus has overcome the world.