

## ***Does Everything Happen For a Reason?***

Romans 8:28-39

Genesis 45:1-15; 50:19-20

Throughout the years I have been asked questions that people wrestle with ... questions about things we often hear said; questions about our faith; questions regarding the afterlife; ... and while there are no clear cut answers to these questions, they are certainly worth taking some time to search the Scriptures, and other trusted resources, to help us decide what we believe. So, for this month, I am going to focus on four of those questions I've been asked.

The first one is: Does everything happen for a reason? This is something we hear said often times. It is said at times when we need comfort, when we don't understand the reason, but we are trying to make some sense of a senseless thing.

But if we really believe that everything happens for a reason, can we also still believe that human beings have what we refer to as "free will?" And does that have something to do with that old Presbyterian word ... Predestination? Paul used that word in the letter to the Romans that I just read. The doctrine of predestination is one that is rather confusing but I think mostly Paul was saying God decided ahead of time – before we even confessed our sin – to give us grace through Christ.

But some people take it much farther than that. Was everything predestined to happen ... some master plan that is just waiting for the right time? My Methodist colleague at the Upper Room used to love to tease me about predestination. Every time any little thing went wrong, he would say, "aren't you glad that's over with?"

If everything happens for a reason, but the happening is out of our hands, then does that mean there is another control somewhere? Is it fate? Is it astrology ... the way the stars, the moon and the sun are lined up? Is it luck?

These questions remind me of my philosophy class in college. But, for God's people, they are not questions of fate or luck or astrology. They are questions of faith. Believers through out the centuries have sought to answer questions like this ... they have struggled together with understanding what the Bible says.

Out of the wrestling has come a book that we Presbyterians have referred to for many years ... it is, in fact, Part 1 of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, USA. It is called ***The Book of Confessions***.

In studying for this sermon, I went to the ***Book of Confessions***, to see what people of faith have said in the past about these issues. The Second Helvetic Confession was written during the Reformation in 1561, by a minister and

theologian in Switzerland, named Heinrich Bullinger. It was soon adopted as a Confession of Faith by churches throughout Europe.

This confession of faith states that before the fall, when humans turned from God and sinned, we were created with free will. We could choose good or we could choose evil. Unfortunately, evil was chosen and sin and death entered into the human race.

Certainly we are not forced by God to choose good, nor are we forced by the devil to choose sin. We are free to make that choice all by ourselves. The phrase “the devil made me do it,” just isn’t valid in this “free will” doctrine, although I do believe there is evil in the world, outside our free will bad choices ... sinful choices.

The Second Helvetic Confession says “... when we frequently see that the worst crimes and designs of men are prevented by God from reaching their purpose, this does not take away man’s freedom in doing evil, but God by his own power prevents what man freely planned, otherwise.”

We see that happen in our Scripture story today about Joseph and his brothers. When Joseph revealed his identity to his brothers and they realized the power he had over them, remembering what they had done, they were naturally afraid of what he would do. But Joseph forgave them and said to them, “You meant to do evil to me ... but God meant it for good.”

These brothers had evil in their hearts. They chose to do evil to Joseph out of their jealousy and resentment. They had the free will to choose what they would do.

But, you might ask, if it was part of God’s plan, then maybe God did somehow make them choose to sell Joseph. After all, Joseph had dreams that this would happen. It **must** have been part of God’s plan. So ... **does** everything happen for a reason?

We certainly do have free will. God didn’t create us out of love and then make us to be like puppets on a string ... God isn’t sitting up in heaven as the great manipulator of everything we do. And God surely does not force us to love Him or to choose what is good.

Yet, on the other hand, since the first time humans sinned, we have found it impossible to use our free will to **never** sin! Free will has inevitably been used to choose to **turn away** from God, more than **toward** God ... which is why we have to believe that God is still the ruler over all. We, in the Reformed faith, call this the Providence of God.

Here is what Paul Achtemeir says in the bible dictionary about providence: *“for people of faith, it is the belief that God, the creator, is personally responsible for preserving and regulating the created order. God has a plan and a purpose for his world. Providence is not a principle of orderliness or reason; rather it is the will of the Creator who is actively involved in moving his creation to a goal. History is not a cyclical process of endless repetition; history is being moved toward the predetermined end.*

*The key words in the idea of providence are: foreknowledge or foresight. While humans see and judge from the limitations of time and space, even when we are able to lean on the wisdom of prior generations ... God sees the end from the beginning.*

*In Jesus, we see that God’s providential goal is salvation rather than destruction.”*

We read in Genesis 1 and 2 that God created everything. And while God gave us the free will to make choices, at the same time, God has a plan. He knew all along that the whole creation would collapse if He left us to ourselves. We can see that God had a plan for Abraham as he called him and led him and his wife and family to a new land and made a covenant with them that would reach out to us today!

We can see that God had a plan for Moses and the people of Israel. We read today of Joseph and his brothers and the plan God had for them.

And the **New** Testament is full of people, led by God, to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

None of these people were forced to say yes to God. All of them had free wills. They all made choices that were not always good and most surely, were not all in God’s plan. Yet, we can see that what Paul says in Romans 8 ... that “God works all things for good, for those who love Him and have been **called according to his purpose**” has been consistent in every situation.

There’s where we see a good example of predestination. God calls people for his purposes, for his plans ... and it seems to always be plans that are redemptive in the end. Predestination isn’t about God causing someone to trip, or to lose, or get a job. It’s about God choosing you before you ever chose God. It’s about God knowing and loving you from the beginning, and planning grace for you.

Does everything happen for a reason? I am reluctant to say yes to that question. I see too much evil in the world ... too many painful things, violent things that hurt and destroy. And I do not believe that God has any part with evil.

I do believe that God created the world with a great plan for relationship and peace and love. And that God calls his people to be a part of that plan. God uses all his people, and can use every situation, every illness, every heartache for good, even if we don't see it in the beginning.

I believe that we have the freedom to make bad choices and those choices cause consequences that can be a domino effect ... rippling down through the generations.

Yet ... even in our sinfulness, even with our fumbling around, God can and does take our messes and work them into good things ... beautiful things ... in order to work out His plan.

Ultimately, I believe the greatest part of God's plan is Jesus Christ. We are so weak when it comes to choosing good over evil. And there is no way that we can do that perfectly all the time. And so if we can't choose good all the time, all our life ... there is no real hope for us without God's saving grace, given through his Son, Jesus.

*"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in Him might not die, but would have eternal life."* That's the great plan of God ... that all the world might be reconciled to Him.

Does everything happen for a reason? I don't know for sure about **everything** ... but I'm confident about some things ...

- Jesus on a cross ... happened for a reason.
- The empty tomb ... happened for a reason.
- The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost ... happened for a reason.
- The church exists ... for a reason.
- God chooses **you as a disciple** to be part of his great plan ... for a reason.

You have freedom to decide what you believe. You have freedom to choose to say yes. But if you do ... your freedom is bound up with God's will and God's people ... and God calls that good!  
Amen.