Romans 8:28 *Christianisms: Everything Happens for a Reason*

***I’m That Guy Now***Today is the fourth week in our series called *Christianisms*. I’m preaching on some statements and slogans that we tend to use quite often in the church world, but which do not come from the Bible. They sound like they come from the Bible, but they don’t. In fact, they are Christian clichés, non-Biblical half-truths which we often say to one another without really thinking them through.

And it’s happened to me a couple of times in the last couple of weeks: I’ve been in conversation and somebody has used the phrase I’m planning to preach on today.

The first time was when I was at lunch with a couple of friends. One of them had just received some bad news, so we were commiserating with him. We were listening to the story of what had happened, and talking together about next steps. Basically, we were just trying to be supportive friends. And then, there was a little bit of a lull in the conversation, and my one friend says to the other: “Well, everything happens for a reason.”

And immediately—and I’m not real proud of this—I said: “You know that’s not in the Bible, right?”

So, I’m that guy now.

I was trying to be funny, but I don’t think I came off that way. He knew about the sermon series, so he knew what I was getting at. And, of course, he didn’t actually say it came from the Bible. But it did give us a chance to think about whether that phrase is helpful or not.

The second time was earlier this week. I was talking to somebody who was in a bad financial situation. He’d been injured a couple of months ago. He wasn’t able to work, so he wasn’t able to pay his bills. He was about two months behind on his rent and utilities. He had applied for disability earlier in the week, and he was pretty sure he was going to qualify; but it was going to take at least a couple of more months for the paperwork to go through. In the meantime, his power was getting shut off and his landlord was getting impatient.

A tough situation. We talked for a while about possible sources of help and different agencies in town. Then, as the conversation ended he said: “I know everything happens for a reason, I just wish I knew what it was.”

This time, I was better, I didn’t say anything. But you know what I wanted to say? Yeah, I wanted to say “that’s not in the Bible.” But, more than that, I wanted to say: “It would seem that the reason is that you waited too long to do anything about your problem. You’ve been behind on your bills for a couple of months, but you only asked for help at the last minute. Now you’ve made your crisis into someone else’s crisis.” But I didn’t say anything.

“Everything happens for a reason.” We’ve all heard it. We’ve probably all said it. It’s one of the most popular Christianisms out there. And it exists in several forms: when someone is dealing with some bad news, when someone is struggling to make sense of things, we say:

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

If you have ever been on the receiving end of a statement like this, you know how unhelpful it can be. We were talking about it at staff break this week. Each of us has been through various seasons of bad news. And we agreed that when you are in the middle of great grief, the last thing you want to hear is that “everything happens for a reason.” As one member of the staff put it: “The first person to say it is the first person to be punched in the nose.”

***A New Outline***Actually, of all the phrases that we’ll be looking at in this series, I’d say this one is the closest to expressing Biblical truth. We believe that Jesus is the King of the universe. We believe that no matter what happens, He remains in control. So we believe that no matter what happens, God can use it for His purposes, His glory, and our ultimate good. In that sense, there is indeed a reason behind everything that happens.

And yet, the cliché itself, and the way we so often use it, is really not all that helpful. And, as we’ll see, it can lead to some ideas that can produce great spiritual harm.

For the last three weeks, I’ve been using the same outline. I’ve been asking: 1) Is there any Biblical truth? 2) Where does the statement go wrong? And 3) Is there better news in the gospel? This week, I’m going to change that up a little bit. Partly because I’m getting bored. And partly because this phrase is so close to being Biblical, I think we’re going to need to come at it a little differently. We’ll probably go back to the three questions next week.

But this week, I have four questions, and the first one is:

***What We Are Really Saying***When we say “everything happens for a reason,” **what are we really saying?** What do we mean when we use that phrase?

Here’s what I think we are really saying. When we say “everything happens for a reason” what we really mean to say is “**everything (bad) happens for a (good) reason**.” What we are really saying is that if a bad thing has happened to somebody, there must be a reason—a good reason—that it is happening. Which is really only a short step from saying to somebody: “You know, this bad thing that happened to you? It’s really a good thing.” Or, to use another Christianism, “it’s a blessing in disguise.”

Now you might say, “That’s not what I mean when I say it.” You’ll say to me, “What I’m meaning to say is that God has things under control. That God can take even bad things and use them for good results. I’m not calling a bad thing a good thing.” I know that’s not what you are trying to say, but it is what you are communicating.

And here’s how I know: this is a phrase we only use when we are talking about bad things. You would never dream of using this phrase to talk about a good thing. Somebody comes to you and says: “I got a scholarship to my dream school!”, you don’t reply: “Well, everything happens for a reason.” You could say that. Getting a scholarship is a part of everything that happens. But if you would say that in that situation, people would think you were a real Debbie Downer. “What do you mean everything happens for a reason? You don’t think my scholarship is a good thing?”

We don’t use the phrase for good news, we only use it for bad news.

So, obviously, we’re saying that there is a reason this bad thing happened. And, since we are trying to be encouraging, we’re saying that reason must be good. Right? I mean, if your friend totals his truck because he was driving drunk, you can say: “everything happens for a reason” and what you would mean is that a bad thing happened (totaled truck) because of a bad reason (drinking and driving). But we don’t use the phrase that way either. We use it to try to encourage somebody that there must be a good reason for the suffering they are experiencing.

When we say that everything happens for a reason, what we’re really saying is that everything (bad) happens for a (good) reason.

And, because we are Christians, that means that we are saying that God has caused this bad thing to happen because it fits into His good plan for you. As we say: “It must be part of the plan.” Which is to say: God has caused this bad thing for good reasons.

***Why this Matters?***Which leads to my second question: **Where is the spiritual harm?** We need to think about the implications of this statement. Where does it lead? I have three answers to this question.

For one, it leads to **God-blaming**. As we just saw, saying that everything happens for a reason is pretty much the same as saying that God has caused this bad thing to take place.

There can be comfort in that, if you trust that God is good and has your best interests in mind.

But it can just as easily make you bitter and angry at God: “If this is God’s plan for me, then I don’t like his plan very much! He’s not a good God, and I don’t like the way He is messing with my life. If everything happens for a reason, then it’s God’s fault that I’m going through the junk I’m going through, and maybe then I’ll just be done with God.”

The problem is that we are confusing what God allows with what God causes. God permits things to happen in the world—and to us—and we assume that He prefers those things. We assume that if God permitted it, then He must have planned it, and therefore He designed these terrible things that have happened to us. But the Bible is clear, in passages like James 1:13 and 1 John 1:5, that God does not cause evil and in Him there is no darkness at all.

So we must stop short of calling God the author of evil. He may have permitted it, but that doesn’t mean He caused it. He is able to redeem it, but that’s not the same as saying He is to blame for it.

Or, again, this phrase can lead us to doing what I call **2) Silver-lining searching.** If everything happens for a reason, then—naturally—what do we do? We start looking for the reason. Whenever a dark cloud comes are way, we try to come up with the sliver-lining behind it all.

And, frankly, that can lead to some really gross ideas.

Take, for example, a spouse who has an affair. Two marriages are wrecked. Two households disrupted. All kinds of drama and heartache. But maybe the affair leads to a permanent relationship. And maybe that new marriage is really strong, and leads to a happy family. “See,” the new couple will say, “God has brought us together. It was meant to be.”

Seriously?! Do you really thing that God wanted you to commit adultery? Do you really think God is in the business of breaking His own commandments to put couples together?

Look, God is all-kinds of gracious. He can redeem our worst mistakes, and He can bless families that start out of all kinds of difficult situations. But that doesn’t mean our sin is a good thing.

Or, again, maybe you’ve heard of murderers who have given their lives to Jesus while in prison. “Well,” we’ll say, “look at the silver-lining. At least something good came out of it. At least this person knows the Lord now.”

Really?! Do you really think the only way God could bring that person to salvation was by having him or her kill somebody first? Again, God can overcome sin. He can forgive the vilest of sinners. Even murderers. But don’t think for a minute that God designs for somebody to be a murder victim, just so the killer can come to know Christ.

Searching for the silver-lining can lead us to say all kinds of dumb things. Isaiah 5:20 says:

Woe to those who call evil good and good evil.

Let’s be really careful about implying that a diagnosis of cancer, or the death of a child, or a natural disaster that kills thousands of people is somehow a good thing. Because it’s not. And if you’re ever tempted to tell someone it is, just don’t.

Then, third answer to “Where is the spiritual harm?”: It leads to **3) misplaced hope.** Larry Osborne tells this story:

I remember the question-and-answer session that followed a talk I gave on “Where’s God When All Hell Breaks Loose?” A mother of a severely handicapped young boy stood up. Her son suffered from life-threatening seizures, often occurring daily.

At first she seemed to push back on the idea that God might not be the direct instigator of all that was happening to her son. She claimed it gave her purpose, meaning, and strength to see her son’s condition as God’s plan for her life.

Then she suddenly started to sob—deep, gut-wrenching sobs. Her next words revealed the dark side of her paradigm: a crushing disillusionment with God. “When will he fix this?” she cried out. “I can’t take it anymore. Why doesn’t he answer?”

Armed with the conviction that her son’s condition was God’s doing and would somehow prove to be a good thing in the long run, she was banking on an earthly miracle she would probably never see instead of setting her hope on the eternal inheritance that she and her son were guaranteed to see.

She was caught in an emotional quandary. As long as she saw God as the direct cause of her son’s seizures, there was the possibility that he would stop the seizures. In that, she found great hope. But if he was the direct cause of the seizures, he was also the author of her son’s private hell. In that she found great despair. (*10 Dumb Things Smart Christians Believe*, p. 98)

When we believe that every bad thing happens for a good reason, we start putting our hope in a silver-lining that may never appear. Jesus is our ultimate hope, not the wishful thinking that our suffering will miraculously come to an end.

***So…why?***Now my third question. If we are going to say that every bad thing does not happen for a good reason, then we want to know: **why do bad things happen?** If God is not the designer of these bad things, where do they come from?

Obviously, this is a big question, and I could preach on it every Sunday for the next 5 years and we still wouldn’t have if fully figured out. But, in a nutshell, let me give you three reasons bad things happen:

**1) We live in a fallen world.** Sometimes bad things happen because we live in a world that is still caught in the backwash of Adam’s sin. Because of sin, God’s good creation has been corrupted and compromised. As it says in Genesis, childbirth became painful and weeds started to grow. (Genesis 3:16 & 18) As it says in Romans, “creation was subjected to frustration” and is in “bondage to decay.” (Romans 8:20-21)

It’s because we live in a fallen world that nervous systems sometimes go haywire and little boys are subjected near-fatal and oft-repeated seizures. It’s because we live in a fallen world that healthy cells within our bodies mutate and go from being helpful servants to our well-being to cancerous traitors that threaten our very lives. It’s because we live in a fallen world that sharks attack (shout out to Shark Week!), horses stampede, and bears rip up campers’ tents.

More than that, it’s because our world is fallen that many of the laws of nature that we count on to be helpful and predictable can also work against us and cause great damage. For example, the gravity that keeps us from flying right off the surface of this planet also means a plane that loses power will crash to the ground. The same low-pressure system that brings much needed rain to the crops of the Midwest can first exist as a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico that will devastate the coast. The same immune system that protects us from bacteria and virus can also attack our bodies in the form of autoimmune diseases like rheumatoid arthritis or multiple sclerosis.

Simply put: Bad things happen because our world is broken. Larry Osborne writes:

Any attempt to downplay the universal impact of the fall—or worse, the assumption that Christians have a magic bubble of protection—fails to square with Scripture. Or with life. It’s a recipe for disappointment with God. When it comes to the consequences of the fall, we aren’t offered immunity. We’re offered eternity. (*10 Dumb Things*, p. 95)

Or, **2) We deal with fallen people.** Sometimes bad things happen because the people around us are sinful and some of the sins they commit directly impact us.

It’s not “a coincidence that the first story in the Bible after the fall of Adam and Eve is about a bad guy killing a good guy. That’s what happens in a fallen world. Bad people do bad things and good people get hurt.” (Osborne, p. 94) So make a list of the worst things that people can do to each other: racial discrimination, sexual harassment, rape, child abuse, trafficking, murder, mass shootings—those bad things happen not because God has a good reason, but because sinful people are committing sin.

And it’s not just the really, really bad things. Sin is a universal condition. Everyone you meet is a sinner. And that means sometimes your friend will betray you, sometimes your boss will lie to you, sometimes your spouse will lose his or her temper and say an unkind thing. Those are bad things too, and they happen because we live in a fallen world with fallen people.

But, those aren’t the only reason bad things happen. **3) We have a fallen nature**. The bad isn’t just out there, it’s also in here. Let’s face it: a lot of the bad things that happen to us are the result of choices we have made.

Not all of those choices are necessarily sinful, some are just foolish. Maybe we didn’t think a decision all the way through, maybe we didn’t do enough research. But if you make a bad investment and your portfolio is wiped out; if you fail to look both ways and drive into oncoming traffic; if you wear socks with sandals and ruin your social status; those choices have consequences. It’s silly to blame God for our bad choices.

Moreover, a lot of bad things happen to us because we make sinful choices. If you fail out of school because you didn’t go to class and you didn’t do your homework, don’t say that God must have had a good reason for letting it happen. If you are in jail because you’ve been writing bad checks and skipping out on your creditors, don’t ask why God is making your go through this. Sometimes the chickens come home to roost. Osborne again:

The good news isn’t that God promises to keep us from making lame decisions or to fix whatever we break. It’s that he promises to continue working for our eternal good no matter how many dimwitted judgements we make along the way. (95)

The world is fallen. Other people are fallen. We are fallen. In a world like that, bad things are going to happen.

***The God of Purpose***Now, let’s get to my fourth and final question: **What is the Biblical perspective on this**? How do we match this phrase up with the teaching of the Bible?

I’m a Calvinist. That means I believe strongly in God’s control and governance of our world. Some theological terms that are important to me are God’s sovereignty and providence. That means I do not believe in things like fate, or luck, or chance. I do not believe that things happen in the world that are ever beyond God’s supervision or control. Some Bible verses which express these ideas are **Isaiah 46:9-10**:

**9**Remember the former things, those of long ago;  
    I am God, and there is no other;  
    I am God, and there is none like me.  
**10**I make known the end from the beginning,  
    from ancient times, what is still to come.  
I say, ‘My purpose will stand,  
    and I will do all that I please.’

God does all that He pleases. I take that to mean that nothing can happen outside of His will. Or, as **Proverbs 16:4** says:

**4**The Lord works out everything to its proper end—  
    even the wicked for a day of disaster.

God is guiding things where He wants them to go.

The way I often explain this is I do not believe that God can be surprised. I do not believe there has never been a thing in my life—a good thing or a bad thing or a thing in between—where God has looked down from heaven and said: “I can’t believe that happened to Russell!” or “I did not see that coming.”

For me, if that were possible, I’m not sure God would even fit my definition of what it means to be God. That is to say: if there are things happening in our world that God is not strong enough to see coming or powerful enough to stop, then He’s really not much of a god at all.

Now, I know that raises all kinds of questions. I know it sounds like I’m talking out of both sides of my mouth. On the one hand, I’m saying that God does not plan or design the bad things that happen to us; while on the other hand I’m saying that nothing happens that God does not know about in advance or could not stop if He decided to. This is all kinds of confusing. We’re dealing with some of the mystery of what it means to be God. But these ideas are both taught in scripture, and I believe both are true.

As I mentioned earlier, it is sometimes helpful to think about what God permits, and what God plans. He does not directly plan all the evil in the world, but He does permit it. And He’s not surprised by it. And, most importantly, He’s not defeated by it.

Which leads me to **Romans 8:28**. This is the verse that I listed as our text for this morning. It’s the verse that probably gets cited the most often when we talk about the phrase “everything happens for a reason.” It’s the verse that seems to teach that very idea:

**28**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.

This is a great promise, one of the most precious promises in scripture. It’s a verse to treasure, and a verse to quote in the middle of hard times.

But let’s think about what this verse is not saying. For one thing, this is not a promise for everyone. The promise here is specifically for those who love God and have been called according to His purposes. That leaves out a lot of people, and a lot of things that happen.

For another thing, this verse is not saying that everything that happens is good. Or even that everything happens for a good reason. It is promising that in all things God is at work for the good of His people (those who love Him and have been called.)

Osborne writes:

In other words, even the enemy’s best shot can’t thwart God’s ultimate plan. God can and will accomplish his good purposes no matter what. But that’s a far cry from saying that everything that happens is somehow good or necessary. (p. 90)

The point is that nothing happens to those who love God that is beyond His ability to redeem, restore, and renew. The beauty and promise of Romans 8:28 is not that every bad thing that happens to us will eventually prove to be a good thing; but that, no matter how bad things get, God’s ultimate and eternal purposes for us—our ultimate good—will not be foiled.

Maybe that word “purpose” can be helpful here. It’s the same word the English translators chose to use in the Isaiah passage I quoted, and it is hinted at in the Proverbs passage as well. I know it may sound like a matter of semantics, but Kyle Idleman says we should pay attention to the difference between “reason” and “purpose.” He writes:

Instead of asking “What is the reason?” we should ask “What is the purpose?” Because I don’t know if there is always a reason but I know God in his grace always has a purpose.

What’s the difference between “reason” and “purpose”? Reason looks for a because, but purpose focuses on the for. Reason wants a logical explanation that makes sense out of something that has happened. Purpose offers us a hope that whatever has happened God can work for good.

Do you remember what Jesus said when he and his disciples came across a man who had been born blind (John 9), or when he got the news that a tower had fallen over in Siloam and killed eighteen innocent people (Luke 13)? People cam and asked him, “Why has this happened? What’s the explanation?” The people wanted a reason. But Jesus told them they were asking the wrong question. He explained, in so many words, “These things happen, but watch for the work of God to be accomplished here.” Jesus didn’t give them a reason but he assured them there was purpose.

God’s grace to us in our pain is that our pain is not without purpose. God can work through it to make us more like Jesus. (*Grace is Greater*, p. 181)

***The Redeeming Power of the Cross***I know we’ve covered a lot of ground today, and I realize I may not have given the most satisfying of answers. The phrase: “everything happens for a reason” is not found in the Bible. The idea may be, but with some caveats. Nothing happens in our world that is outside of God’s supervision. But that is not the same as saying that He is the designer of evil; and it certainly does not mean that everything bad that happens is actually good. It does mean that God can work in all things for our good and His purposes.

Allow me to wrap up by transitioning to communion. One of the concepts I have been hinting at throughout the sermon is redemption. God does not design for someone to be a murderer or a molester, but even the worst of sinners are not beyond the reach of His forgiveness. God does not ordain broken families, but even out of brokenness He can bring wholeness and restoration. God doesn’t cancel out the consequences of the fall, but in spite of our fallenness He keeps working for our redemption.

And the way that works is through the cross of Jesus Christ. Here’s the very worst of all the worst things that could happen: the Son of God put to death by the human beings He created; and yet it is this tragedy that God uses to absorb all the sinfulness and brokenness and fallenness of the world. God can work all things for our good through the filter of Christ’s death and resurrection.

And it is that death which we remember at the communion table; and that promise of restoration and renewal that we claim.

While communion is being served, Jason and Terry are going to sing a song of invitation. It’s called “Come to the Table”, and it is getting at this idea of redemption. **Here’s what the chorus says:**

He said come to the table  
Come join the sinners who have been redeemed  
Take your place beside the Savior now  
Sit down and be set free  
Come to the table

We don’t get promised a reason for everything that happens to us; but through the cross of Jesus, we do get the promise that everything—including us—can be redeemed.