

“Does Everything Happen for a Reason?”

Genesis 18:16-33

Series: Half Truths Week 1

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Since this is Independence Day weekend I think about the year America celebrated its 200th birthday. I was in 8th grade and our art teacher taught us to create marionettes and do a play about the signing of the Declaration of Independence. We turned all the key players into puppets. You might say we strung up the Founding Fathers. My puppet was Ben Franklin – complete with bifocals. We put on the play for our school and other schools. We were in the newspaper. We even went to the New Jersey State Teachers Convention that year to perform. After it was over my art teacher came up and said, “You guys were great. So much better than that puppet show they had last year.” “Who did they have last year?” “Oh it was a guy with a dumb green sock puppet named Kermit.” Jim Henson and the Muppets had nothing to fear from us.

Today we begin a message series called *Half-Truths: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Others Things the Bible Doesn't Say* by Adam Hamilton. For the next five weeks we'll examine quotes and clichés that roll off the tongues of many Christians. Perhaps even you have said some of these. Don't be embarrassed. Clichés are passed around because they bear the ring of truth. Unfortunately, as Adam Hamilton points out, they are only half-true. They are not the whole story. They are not exactly Biblical and often quite harmful.

That's true of today's half-truth: “Everything happens for a reason.” Christians often say some form of this to comfort those who face disappointment or tragedy. You can't have a child, you lose your job, the stock market or economy tanks and you lose your savings, or you lose a loved one.

When something bad has happened and we're trying to help someone through a difficult time, we say “It was meant to be.” When someone dies unexpectedly, we hear “It must have been their time” or “It was part of the plan” or “It must have been God's will.” We seek to console—and others seek to console us—by saying that God has a particular purpose for bringing about (or at least allowing) situations in which people suffer. We may assume that while we don't yet understand why it had to happen, all events in our lives unfold according to God's predetermined and immutable plan. Since God is in charge of everything, whatever happens—a personal setback, an untimely death, a natural disaster—reflects the will and purposes of God.¹

¹Adam Hamilton, *Half Truths: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn't Say*, Abingdon Press.

The truth side is God is in charge. That's comforting to know in a random, chaotic or tragic situation. The trouble side is determining how much control – and responsibility – God has and how much do we? Is God a puppeteer? Does he control us the way I controlled my Ben Franklin puppet? Does He pull the strings behind the scenes? Are we just marionettes who must obey His will? Does God control everything? Is every act already decided and we are just walking through His pre-determined steps? Is the future already written?

If God is in control of every event then we are not responsible for anything. Taken to an extreme we could say, "I'm sorry I forgot to get you an anniversary gift dear. It must have been God's will." Or we could say, "I don't have to help the homeless or share my faith about Jesus. God will take care of it." Even worse, if God controls everything, He is also responsible for everything – genocide, terrorism, school shootings, wars, devastating famine and poverty. This makes God the author of sin and evil.

In his book, Adam Hamilton describes two extreme positions. One he attributes to John Calvin, the father of Presbyterianism. Adam Hamilton is a Methodist so his portrait of Calvin is biased and not exactly accurate but we won't quibble over that. Let's just say Adam was predestined to be wrong about this. This extreme, sometimes called Determinism, states everything is planned and controlled by God. This is why at a funeral someone might say to a grieving person, "God must have needed your loved one in heaven." It was God's plan. As far as I'm concerned that's like pouring salt on a wound. It's not helpful and it's not biblical.

On the other extreme is a view called Deism which, ironically, was held by most of our Founding Fathers like Ben Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine. They believe there is a God who, like a clockmaker, created the world, wound it up and let it go. Since then, God does not intervene in the world in anyway. Deists do not believe in miracles or the incarnation of God in Jesus. God is an outsider and we have complete free will to obey his laws or reject them. This view is the basis of our secular government and our modern world. A pastor friend sent me a cartoon featuring a crabby woman named Maxine who says, "I believe everything happens for a reason. Usually, the reason is that someone screwed up."

There are lots of problems with Deism but a key one is it leaves us all alone in a random, meaningless universe. Once, a photographer from the Philadelphia Inquirer came to take a picture of Gloria, Martha and me for an article about the Church Has Left the Building. In conversation he told me he was a Deist. He didn't believe God gets personally involved in this world. Later, when I asked if he wanted to take a picture of our church sign out front he replied, "I don't take pictures of signs. Signs don't tell stories. People do." Maybe God thinks the same and that's why He came in person.

If this is a half-truth, what's the whole truth in the Bible? The Scriptures certainly teach **God is Over All and Everywhere**. In Psalm 139, King David writes,

O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying

down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely.

O LORD. Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. (Psalm 139:1-4, 7-10).

God is above you, around you, behind you, before you, beneath you. You might find that claustrophobic. I feel it's comforting. God is not a slum lord who is too lazy to fix the leaky, broken problems of this home He rented us. He is not a clockmaker who wound up this world and then went to sleep. And He is not an absent Father. Jesus says,

And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him (Matthew 6:7-8).

God our Father is so attentive to us He even knows what we need before we ask Him.

So then why ask Him? God may know our needs, but He works with us to meet them. **God knows the future yet He partners with us to create it.** How can this be? Well as we've just seen, since God is over all and everywhere, He is not bound or limited by time and space as we are. The Bible says in two places:

For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night. (Psalm 90:4; 2 Peter 3:8)

Time does not contain God. He is outside time and can be present at all times. We live in the present. We can remember the past and look forward to the future. But we don't live there. We can only be in the present. That's "now" for us. For God, however, all times are present. Past, present and future are His "now." That means He can act and interact with people in the past as well as the future.

Here's an analogy many find helpful. Imagine you are watching a parade from the street level. You see the clowns, the floats, the Kermit the frog balloon go by one at a time. Your perspective is limited to what's in front of you. Now go into the building behind you, ride the elevator up to the twenty-fifth floor and stand on the balcony. You can still see the part of the parade that passes your location but you can also look left and right along the parade route. The beginning and end of the parade are also part of your view. Our "now" is only the present – the street level view. God's "now" is past, present and future – the entire parade of time. Yet He's not just a spectator. The Lord enters, acts and interacts in all phases of time at the same time. That's how He is able to know the future and partner with us to create it.

He does not need our help. He can manage it all on His own. God could be a puppeteer – controlling our every move. Instead, **God gives us freedom to work with or**

against His will. By giving us freedom, by giving all creation freedom, God takes a huge risk. He allows us and His world to oppose him, reject him and cause great evil. You might say we are in the position of Pinocchio. When the old woodcutter Geppetto carved the puppet Pinocchio from a block of wood he longed for a real live boy to be his son. That night, the Blue Fairy came and granted part of his wish. Pinocchio would be a puppet without strings. He now had the freedom to choose right or wrong. If he did what was right, she promised to make him a completely real boy. Geppetto was overjoyed when he woke in the morning. He sent Pinocchio off to school. Yet the little puppet decided not to go to school and soon was captured and caged by a mean puppeteer. He was tricked by the wily fox and trapped on Pleasure Island where he turned into a donkey. And of course, whenever Pinocchio lied his nose grew.

A life with no strings attached is no guarantee we will use our freedom the right way. It would be foolish to think God controls every one of our moves. He does not cause our sin. He takes off the strings in the hope we will freely love Him and follow His will. Yet like Pinocchio, we get off the path, fall into cages of our own making, give in to temptations, run after pleasures and sometimes we make a donkey of ourselves. Like Pinocchio, we can be real blockheads.

God, however, does not give up on us. In fact, He wants to partner with us to do what's right. He wants to bless this world through us. Consider Abraham. He faithfully worshiped the One True God and followed the Lord even when the path led over the horizon into the great unknown. Yet Abraham was not perfect. He was impatient, doubtful, deceptive and even trapped by his own mistakes. God did not give up on him. For the Lord had a plan to bless the whole world through this flawed but faithful man.

On one occasion, when the Lord visited Abraham and his wife Sarah, God put the patriarch through a little test. He wanted to check Abraham's righteousness radar.

Then the LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him" (Genesis 18:17-19).

The Lord wonders, 'Does Abraham possess a sense of right and wrong, of justice and mercy and compassion?' To find out, the Lord presents Abraham with a test case. He tells Abraham the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah has gone too far and the Lord is going to investigate. Abraham knows it's bad down in the twin cities. He knows judgment will follow. The Lord watches for his reaction. Will Abraham say, "It's about time you wiped those miserable sinners off the face of the earth"? Will he say, "Oh they're just having a good time down there. Sure there's greed, immorality, corruption, injustice and abuse. But why don't you look the other way, Lord? After all, what happens in Sodom and Gomorrah stays in Sodom and Gomorrah."

Yet Abraham says neither. Instead He does something bold, risky and life threatening. He negotiates with God. Middle-eastern people like to bargain and negotiate. When my daughter Kristin selected her first car and it was time to make a deal my wife said, “Why don’t you go in and do the bargaining. It’s in your middle-eastern blood.” So I rolled up my sleeves, went into the office and said, “We’ll offer you this much for the car.” The salesman said, “Okay, we’ll see if we can do that” and immediately he walked out. Kristin and I looked at each other, “This is going to be easier than we thought.” After a bit the man came back and said, “Sorry. We don’t accept your offer. Good day.” We were stunned. I debated. I haggled. I applied pressure. And in the end I successfully got them to come down...a whole \$41. I had them begging for mercy.

Deists tend to portray God as a distant, emotionless, cold force. Not the Bible. In Scripture we find God is a passionate, personal, participant in our world. And, at times, He is a negotiator like with Abraham. Yet the old patriarch is not negotiating for a car but for the population of two cities. Abraham doesn’t excuse or overlook their evil. He doesn’t ignore the great sin they heaped up against God and their neighbors. He pleads for a reprieve. There must be a least fifty righteous people in that mess. They could be a positive influence on the rest. They could be the salt and light in that tasteless darkness.

Then Abraham approached him and said: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Genesis 18:23-25).

Now that’s some risky negotiation. Those are not fighting words – they’re smiting words. Abraham takes on the God who can squash him like a bug. He tells our Heavenly Father to be fair. He challenges the Judge of the earth to be just. He demands our Maker be merciful. And the Lord says, ‘Yes.’

If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake (Genesis 18:26).

Abraham survives. He wins the negotiation. He can stop there. But he doesn’t.

Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people? (Genesis 18:27-28).

Abraham is insane. This is more dangerous than having a picnic in a lion’s den. Yet each time God agrees. He allows Abraham to lower the number of righteous people all the way down to ten. Why? The Lord knows if Abraham is willing to stand up to God Almighty for the sake of justice and mercy, he won’t be afraid of anyone on earth. Together, God, Abraham and his descendants (which include us) will be a blessing in a broken world.

God is not a puppeteer who pulls our strings. He wants us to join Him in His work to bless and save the world. In seminary, one of my professors said God is more a

playwright who creates characters for a story. A bad playwright will imagine characters and then, to get the story to reach a certain ending, he or she changes the characters, makes them do something against their natures, forces them to act in a way which doesn't make sense. A good playwright, however, is able to weave a story line that allows every character to act according to his or her personality in such a way that it all comes to the satisfying conclusion the playwright intended.

Prayer is the way we talk with God, debate with the Lord, and peek into His will so we may know what He is doing in this world. Partnership is the way God shapes us, refines us, even tests us so we may be a blessing in this world. Prayer and Partnership are the ways we enter into the story line of the Great Playwright.

Paul says,

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)

All things are not good. All things do not turn out good. But God works in all things to bring out good. And God is working for your good.

I have been with many of you when life was not good – in my office, in the courtroom and prison, in the emergency waiting room, in the hospice center, in the funeral home, at the graveside. Things were not good. You could have turned away. You could have rejected God. But you didn't. Instead, you prayed and partnered with God. You worked with God to bring good out evil in the lives of others. You started missions. You comforted the grieving. You healed the sick. You visited prisons and nursing homes. You helped addicts. You fed, clothed, and built homes for the homeless. You preached the Good News of love and hope through words and deeds. You entered the story of our Great Playwright.

Partner with God to bring good out of evil. He really does love you.

And that's a promise with no strings attached.