

Everything Happens for a Reason Pt 2

1 Peter 1:3-7

On April 15, 2013, the annual running of the Boston Marathon turned deadly when two homemade bombs exploded close to the finish line. The blasts killed three people and wounded 260 others. Some of the wounded ended up permanently disabled. One year later, the New York Times did a follow up profile of some of those seriously wounded the year before. Not surprisingly, some were still dealing with anger, bitterness and even rage at what had happened to them. One man, who lost a leg in the blast, declared that the event had destroyed his marriage and ruined his life. His rage had led him to a dark place and he struggled to get through each day. But surprisingly, there were others who were doing well. They had adapted to their new reality, they had come to terms with their injuries, and they even found a place for joy and gratitude. One woman, a 45 year-old named Cheryl, told the Times, "In some ways, this was a blessing for me. It has made my life more rich, more full. I've learned to appreciate the gift of every day. The experience was painful, but it changed my whole attitude." A 39-year old man named Tom who now wears a prosthetic leg told the Times, "I now embrace the challenges of life, I realize that any day could be my last, so I want to use my positive energy to help other people be more positive and more grateful."

What I find most interesting about the follow up interview with survivors of the Boston Marathon bombing, is how people can go through the exact same experience but respond in different ways, and thus put their lives on totally different trajectories. One of the fundamental spiritual truths revealed in the Bible is simply this: It's not so much what happens to us that matters most, it's how we interpret what happens to us that matters most. How we respond to a circumstance or experience in life something is largely a matter of how we interpret that experience; the meaning we give to it. The story we tell ourselves about why it happened and lessons we can draw from it and how that fits into the bigger picture of our lives. When something difficult or painful or tragic happens, we have a choice about how we will interpret that painful or tragic experience. Our choice will determine our response. Whether we get bitter or we get better.

So welcome back to the second part of a two-part teaching. This teaching is based on the common cliché, "Everything Happens for a Reason." As I mentioned last week, some people like this cliché and use it regularly. It helps them deal with unexpected events, disappointments, and struggles. But when

Christians use this expression, when we say, “Everything Happens for a Reason” we are making a statement about our faith in God. We are not saying, “Everything happens for a reason, and this experience must be part of God’s plan for me. Not everything that happens in our lives is directly sent by God or caused by God. It would be terribly cruel to tell a mother who has watched her 10 year old daughter die from cancer that “God must have wanted you to experience this because it is part of his plan. Everything happens for a reason.” That is not what we mean. When we say, “Everything happens for a reason,” we acknowledge that in this world there are things that happen that are beyond our control, but we know God is ultimately in control. He may not have sent the unexpected circumstances or the tragic event, but He allowed it. And if He allowed it, He can and will use it for good in our lives if we cooperate. When we say “Everything happens for a reason,” we are affirming the words of the Bible that in all things God works together for good. Not that all things are good, but that in all things God works for good.

But to simply say “Everything happens for a reason” is insufficient. That’s a good enough start, but we must go further. We must try to discover and discern what the actual reason is. Knowing the reason helps us grow and mature, knowing the reason helps us cooperate with God and make good decisions that lead to better outcomes. And as I mentioned last week, while we can’t always know the reason why something happens in our lives, when we study the Bible we typically find that there are four typical reasons why God either sends something into our lives or allows something into our lives. If something happens that is beyond our control, God will often use that for good. And here are the four ways God uses it for Good: God teaches us, God prunes us, God reminds us, and God tests us. Teaching, pruning, reminding and testing. There could be other reasons, but these are the four primary ways God works good in the midst of unexpected and difficult circumstances. And last week we looked at teaching and pruning. If you missed that message, I encourage you to go back and listen or watch. We looked at how God uses pain, disappointment and difficulty to teach us and prune us. This week we are moving on to look at how God reminds us and tests us.

God works all things together for good. And sometimes, the good is that God is allowing difficult circumstances to remind us of something we already know but often either forget or take for granted. This is especially true when either we or

someone we know and love experiences a serious illness, or a disease or even death itself. Because we live in a world that values health and youth and vitality and longevity, we need to be reminded on a pretty regular basis that this earthly life is temporary, that each day is a gift, and that all of us are going to experience physical suffering and death at some point.

Earlier generations had a better appreciation of the fact that this life was temporary. A few weeks ago, I celebrated my 60th birthday. I don't feel old, but if we were living 100 years ago in 1920, when the average life expectancy for an adult living in America was 54 years, I would be considered way past my expiration date. Just 100 years ago life expectancy was shorter, deadly disease more prevalent, infant mortality rates were higher, and medical technology was not as sophisticated as it is today. In those earlier generations, the death of a loved one was still a painful loss, but it was also accepted as an inevitable reality of life. Today, we struggle with the reality of death. When someone young dies, we find it unfair. When someone is diagnosed with a devastating disease and God does not answer our prayers for physical healing, we sometimes grow angry. In our modern culture, we are conditioned to believe that we have an inherent right to live in perfect health until we turn 100 years old and then die peacefully in our sleep. But in reality, we have no such right. God does not owe us a 70 year, 80 year or 100 year life span.

I'm not trying to suggest we adopt a callous and cavalier attitude about death, an attitude that says, "well, we're all gonna go sometime, so what does it really matter if some die at age 5 and others die at age 30 and or age 80." I'm not suggesting that it is unhealthy to want to alleviate physical illnesses and live a long healthy life. And I'm not trying to trivialize the emotional pain that we experience when a loved one dies. I'm just pointing out an important spiritual truth, that whenever death comes and however death comes, death will come to us all. Death is a reminder to us all that this earthly life is not permanent. This world is not our real home. Paul writes to the Christians in Philippi and says, "But our citizenship is in Heaven, and we eagerly await our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform our lowly bodies to be like His glorious body." The writer to the Hebrews puts it this way in Hebrews 13: "This world is not our home. We are looking forward to our eternal home in Heaven." This is the reminder we all need on a regular basis. Because it is easy to lose our perspective and think that the most important things are of this world, in this life. This life can be good, and we should appreciate the goodness of this life, but this life not the best. The best is yet to come. We are just passing through here, any day could be our final

day, any breath could be our final breath, and someday what happens to everyone in this life will happen to those we love and it will happen to us too. That's not a morbid truth, that's just an honest truth. And so serious illness, injury or death serves to remind us that this life is temporary, these bodies our temporary, every day is a gift, but it is a temporary gift and there are no guarantees or promises about how long we get to enjoy this gift. And we are supposed to live in this life with an awareness of the life yet to come. We are to prepare for eternity and look forward to eternity. It's a regular reminder that we all need if we are to live wisely and well in this life as we anticipate the life yet to come.

Perhaps the question we should all ask ourselves on a regular basis is simply this: have I accepted Jesus as my Savior and Lord, and am I living my life as a loving response to that gift of salvation that He has provided me? Do I have the assurance of my eternal destiny because I have accepted the gift of salvation? Am I reconciled to God? Am I loving Him and am I loving others? There is no more important issue to resolve than the issue of our salvation. So God will frequently use circumstances of illness and death to remind us, and we would do well to pay attention to those reminders.

Everything happens for a reason, and God works all things together for good. Sometimes God will teach us, sometimes God will prune us, and sometimes God will remind us.

And finally, sometimes, things happen in our lives and we can't figure out why. The answer isn't clear, we struggle to understand, and we come to the place where we must simply decide if we will trust God or reject God. In those instances, God is allowing our circumstances to test us. God is testing our faith, asking us to simply trust that He can and He will work all things together for good even when we cannot understand. Our scripture lesson from the Apostle Peter declares an important word to us today. Peter writes, "Beloved, do not be surprised at fiery trials, as though something strange has happened to you. These things come to test your faith." James, the brother of Jesus, writes, "Consider it joy when you encounter difficulties of many kinds, for this testing of your faith produces perseverance in you." In this life, our faith will be tested. And one of the primary ways God tests our faith is by allowing something into our lives that we find difficult to understand.

It's great to have answers to our questions in life, but sometimes answers do not seem to appear. Instead of an answer, God is asking us a question, and the question God is asking us is this: "Will you love and trust me when you do not

understand the reason why something is happening in your life? Will you remain confident in my goodness, and cling to my promises when your life doesn't make sense?"

These past few months have been a challenge for many of us. The Covid 19 pandemic has disrupted our lives in many ways. And perhaps life will never completely return to what it was before the pandemic. And yet, Everything happens for a reason and God is working it together for good. Perhaps this week you and I could spend some time reflecting on how God is using this pandemic as an opportunity for good in our lives. Perhaps God is teaching us some lessons we need to learn. Perhaps God is pruning away some things in our lives that we need to let go of. Perhaps God is reminding us that this life isn't all there is and ultimately this world is not our home, so we need to prepare for eternity. And perhaps this is a testing of our faith. Will we trust when we do not fully understand? Will we remain faithful when it would be easy to drift away from our faith? We will stay strong in the Lord when life doesn't make sense?

God may not be the cause of all the struggles and challenges and tragedies of life, but ultimately He is in control. And if He allows something to happen, He can certainly use it. He works all things together for good. Teaching, Pruning, Reminding and Testing. But we must cooperate, knowing that one day we will stand before Him, and our old physical bodies will be transformed to be like His glorious body. Our citizenship is in heaven. And until that day we live each day knowing that we are indeed more than conquerors through Him, and if we remain true in our faith, nothing will be able to separate us from His great love.