



Half Truths

Week 4: “Everything Happens For a Reason.”

Heather Blair - 09/28/2025

Good morning. Today we continue in our “Half Truths” series—inspired by the book by Adam Hamilton. We’ve been talking about those pithy sentences that end up in our heads—the ones that have a veneer of truth, but don’t really hold up to the weight of real life. Things like “Love the sinner, hate the sin” or “God won’t give you more than you can handle.” They sound good as a reflex reaction, but they can do real damage if we hold onto them too tightly. So, Brian has been encouraging us to upgrade these statements in our minds. “Love the sinner, hate the sin” becomes “Love your neighbor” full stop. “God won’t give you more than you can handle” becomes “God will help you handle all that you’ve been given.” Just these small tweaks can completely transform the way we see God, ourselves, and each other.

This time of year reminds me of a half truth that I lived with for a long time. My junior year of high school, my family decided to host a foreign exchange student. So, two days before school started Karem arrived from Peru. At the time I was pretty teen-agery, so it never occurred to me how hard it must have been for her to move from big-city Lima to backwoods Lebanon.

By October of that year she was really struggling. At dinner one night she was visibly down—which wasn’t like her. My dad asked her what was going on, and six weeks worth of culture shock, language barriers and hard-to-make-friends experiences came tumbling out. I remember this next

part so vividly. He took her hands in his and said, "I'm sorry. I'm so proud of you for making it through all of this. If you want to go home, we understand and we will get you home. But, that's not what we want."

He went on to say, "I'm not sure what it's like in Peru. But it's pretty well known here that October is the hardest month. So many of us struggle in October. If you can just hang on til November, I promise you it will get better." She decided to stay. Not long after that she and I found ourselves sitting on the back deck. She was telling me all about the fantastic time she had at Homecoming (which I didn't even go to). She was giddy, and then suddenly she gasped, "Oh guess what!" she said, "It's November!"

For years after that I would find myself in a struggle-season. My freshman year of college I got a month-long gastrointestinal infection, my junior year of college I was involved in three car wrecks in ten days. None of them terrible, and none my fault, but three was still a lot in ten days. Sometimes it was just the blues, and sometimes there was real mayhem—but anytime I was about to hit despair, I'd look at the calendar and realize it was October. And I'd be able to take a breath, remind myself that I could hang on for a few more days. And November would come and bring relief.

One year—well into my 30's—I was visiting my parents. We were having dinner at that same kitchen table from my high school days. I must have seemed a little down, because my dad asked, "You okay? What's going on?" And I said, "Nothing big, I'm just having an October, you know?" And he nodded and then said, "What?" "You know," I said, "How October is always the hardest month of the year? It's October and I'm feeling it." He nodded some more and then said, "What?" I started to feel like a crazy person. "Dad, you were the one who told me about them. Right here, remember? Remember when Karem was struggling so much and you told her that Octobers are always the hardest month, and if we just hang on til November everything will get better? Remember?!" "Oh, honey," he said, "I just made that up in the moment to help her hang on a little bit."

I had a whole life rhythm I'd been living for almost 20 years. I had repeatedly experienced it being true that October was hard, and November was better. And suddenly I learned it wasn't real at all. Except it was in some ways... the stomach infection, and the car wrecks. Eight years of midterms through college and grad school. The real impact of the loss of daylight on my moods. These were real things for me, and telling myself the story that November would make things better gave me real hope. Precious hope. The cruddy October Theory is a Half Truth at best, but even once I learned that, it was hard to give up. Because it helped me.

The half truth I'd like us to confront here today might be similar for you. It might be scary to consider letting it go, because while we believe in it, it does seem to help. And not believing it can launch us into a kind of chaos where any terrible thing could happen at any time and there's nothing we can do to stop it.

Today's half truth is, "Everything happens for a reason."

Everything happens for a reason.

Like all half truths, there's something there. It works for a while.

*...I didn't get this job I really wanted, but everything happens for a reason.
There must be something better out there for me!*

For Christians, the sentence "Everything happens for a reason" has some super-secret extra words baked inside. "Everything happens for a **divinely-ordained** reason." God is in charge. So God must be doing this. And since God is good, it is all going to work out great!

...My fella broke up with me, and I'm pretty heartbroken. But everything happens for a God reason. So, God must have known he wasn't right for me, and God must have somebody way better for me out there. I just have to wait.

Everything happens for a reason *works* in those scenarios. It helps pick us up from despair. It helps us find hope. It helps us be willing to let go of things when it's time. That's all good stuff. It works.

It works long enough for us to believe it *should always* be true, even when it becomes damaging to continue to believe it. And at some point it will become damaging, because "Everything happens for a God-ordained reason" is a half truth at best.

If I'm so convinced that this isn't a whole truth, where did the idea of "Everything happens for a reason" come from?

One thing that will work in my favor is that you won't find that sentence in the Bible. The closest we might get is Ecclesiastes 3 where it says, "For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven." Which sounds a bit like all things are happening as they should, for a reason. But, the thesis statement of the author of Ecclesiastes is, "Everything is meaningless. A chasing after the wind." I don't think he's right about that—I don't think even he thinks he's right about that—but he can't call everything meaningless in one breath and mean to be telling us that there is a God-ordained reason for everything with the next. So, he's no help.

The idea is mostly tied to passages that are related to the sovereignty of God. "Sovereignty" is a nice old churchy word, isn't it? It means supreme power or authority. And the Bible is full of the notion of God's supreme power and authority. We can hear it in bangers like this from 1 Samuel Chapter 2:

**The Lord kills and brings to life;
he brings down to Sheol and raises up.
The Lord makes poor and makes rich;
he brings low; he also exalts.
He raises up the poor from the dust;
he lifts the needy from the ash heap
to make them sit with princes**

**and inherit a seat of honor.
For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's,
and on them he has set the world.
He will guard the feet of his faithful ones,
but the wicked will perish in darkness,
for not by might does one prevail.**

The sovereignty of God is a Biblical principle that we as United Methodists, and I as a Heather Blair, affirm. And, if God has power over all, it sure does seem like “Everything happens for a God-ordained reason” must be true. But, I want to offer two considerations that contextualize that supreme power and authority. To put it in the real world.

First, just because God holds the power to do all things for all people in all situations doesn't mean God always exercises that power. The passage in 1 Samuel is describing what God has the potential to do, not necessarily what God has done and will do for every single person ever. We can see this truth play out in the stories right around this passage. Not every poor person we encounter ends up feasting with princes. Faithful followers of God die. Evil folks win—for a time at least. What we would say is that God's sovereignty will show itself *ultimately*. But, we would also say there's a difference between what God *can do* and what God *does*.

So, is God orchestrating every minute detail of every human's existence throughout time? I don't think so. And we can see it more clearly in examples like this:

...Ope. I forgot your birthday. Oh well, God must have meant for me to do that.

...I'm gonna come slap you across the face. What will you do? Hit me back? Will it escalate? Real punches? Will we keep going till one of us is dead? If so, does God mean for all that to happen?

No. Utter poppycock and we can see it. What's at work in these two examples are personal failings and consequences of personal choices. It is not the sovereign work of God, right?

Here's the second thing, and it is huge—God has chosen to restrain some of his sovereignty in order to offer us free will. We see God give Adam and Eve dominion—power and authority—in the Garden of Eden. And, we see God offering people choices over and over, like in Deuteronomy 30:19-20:

"I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him, for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."

Were God sovereign without any limitations, then there would be no significant choices available to humans, but here in this passage God grants people the choice between life and death. Blessings and curses. Those don't seem like insignificant trifles. And these words come as God affirms the covenant with Moses and all of Israel. A covenant that the New Testament writers argue extends to us. Real choices with real consequences.

So the writings in the Bible offer us up two truths to hold in tension: the sovereignty of God and the free will of human beings. That's pretty messy.

Doing a good job of explaining it is something folks have worked at for literal millennia. We do the best we can to uphold both truths, but we usually end up falling on the side of sovereignty or free will. Which is okay. God never said this whole thing would be easy.

Which is maybe why quick phrases aren't good at capturing whole truths. "Everything happens for a reason." Okay, but what's that reason? The will of God or the choices of people? Or some kind of complicated soup of the two? And how can we know?

We might be able to figure out the reasons for things like forgetting a birthday, or a job loss. But what about some of the tougher stuff: a miscarriage, financial ruin, the end of a marriage, rape, child abuse, chronic pain, mental illness, cancer, war, genocide. Do these happen for some God-ordained reason? For some human-freewill reason? Some tragedies are way too complicated to try to get a grip on with a simplistic half truth.

So, let's maybe just let this one go all together. Let's don't say it to ourselves, and for goodness sake, let's don't say it to each other. More often than not all it does is dismiss grief, relieve us of personal responsibility, or pretend that senseless tragedies are some kind of reasonable. That's a lot of damage for one little phrase. And we don't need it.

Because, though I don't believe everything happens for a reason, I absolutely believe that God makes beauty out of ashes when we invite and allow him to. I absolutely believe that loving others and being loved by others when we are in our darkest days makes a difference. It doesn't make everything work out every time, but it lifts the heaviness. Which makes room for joy, even in the dark. And, our suffering creates deep wells of empathy in us for others. So that we can join God in being present to and active in the worst moments of others' lives.

I don't believe that everything happens for a reason. But I absolutely believe that God loves us. Beyond all reason. No matter what happens or whose fault it is.

If you're in the midst of a crisis today where the phrase "Everything happens for a reason" has left you feeling hollow, confused or angry; let me offer you some whole truth my dad gave me. It's his favorite scripture passage. I may

be iffy on Octobers, but this has real power. It's a prayer from Paul for all of us in Ephesians 3:

My response is to get down on my knees before the Father, this magnificent Father who parcels out all heaven and earth. I ask him to strengthen you by his Spirit—not a brute strength but a glorious inner strength—that Christ will live in you as you open the door and invite him in. And I ask him that with both feet planted firmly on love, you'll be able to take in with all followers of Jesus the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God.

God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us.