**Nope, That’s Not What the Bible Says: Does Everything Happen for a Reason?**

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Quiz Time!

Is this from the Bible or not? (Real or Fake)

1. "God helps those who help themselves."

 Answer: 👎 – This one’s from Ben Franklin

2. "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

 Answer: 📖 – That’s Jesus, in Matthew 11:28.

3. "This too shall pass."

 Answer: 👎 – 10th century poem

5. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

 Answer: 📖 – Yes! That’s Philippians 4:13.

6. "Cleanliness is next to godliness."

 Answer: 👎 – John Wesley’s 17th-century sermon.

7. "Love the sinner, hate the sin."

 Answer: 👎 – St. Augustine

8. "Be still, and know that I am God."

 Answer: 📖 – Yes, that’s Psalm 46:10.

9. "Spare the rod, spoil the child."

Answer: 👎 – A weird and inaccurate paraphrase of Proverbs 13:24, but not that exact line.

10. "God doesn’t give us more than we can handle."

 Answer: 👎 – Close, but no.

My friend has a mug with a picture of Jesus smacking his head with the caption, “OMG You Guys, that’s not what I said!” Obviously, this is a satirical look at how texts in scripture are mis-interpreted and even misattributed. If you tune into the Christian Broadcast Network, you will see people waving a ~~big ass~~  supersized Bible and proclaiming “The Bible says….” and interpreting scriptures through a theological lens that is…well, not always dripping with the kind of loving god, loving self, loving neighbor which Jesus probably had in mind.

We also are in a time when the Bible is used as a literal weapon—against the gay community, against women, against (fill in the blank here…)

As people of faith, we ought to be as biblically literate as we can. Not to fight any Bible Wars, because I am not sure any one can ever win those but because we have lost our connection to beautiful source of story and prayers and ideas that can strengthen us in our journey through life.

We often hear maxims that are attributed to the Bible which are not actually in the Bible. One of those is “Everything happens for a reason.”

How many of us have heard that before—or said it ourselves?

It’s the kind of phrase that rolls off the tongue when we don’t know what else to say. It tries to offer comfort. It tries to make sense of pain. But as Kate Bowler so poignantly puts it, \*“The only thing worse than saying this is pretending that you know the reason.”\*

In her book, \*Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I’ve Loved\*, Bowler—a theologian, a professor, and a young mother diagnosed with Stage IV cancer—holds a mirror up to the way we talk about pain. She writes:

 “When someone is drowning, the only thing worse than failing to throw them a life preserver is handing them a reason.”

Today’s passage from Romans speaks directly into that drowning place, beginning with a bold and tender truth: “The Spirit helps us in our weakness.” .

Note: It doesn’t say “if we are weak,” but simply \*\*assumes\*\* it: \*we are\*.

We all have weakness at different times in our lives. Not just physically, but spiritually, emotionally, mentally.

The truth is that are finite creatures in a broken world, and that brokenness touches every single one of us.

But if you look closely, the author of Roman, Paul, is NOT offering a reason for weakness, but rather is offering the idea of a “presence” with us in weakest times. our frailties. This presence isn Spirit. The Spirit does not solve, does not fix, does not explain. The Spirit \*intercedes\* with groanings too deep for words. Meaning that Spirt has deep, empathetic involvement that is audible but beyond words.

There is something holy, even divine, in groaning. There is something sacred in the \*inarticulate ache\* of suffering. The Spirit groans \*\*with us\*\*—not above us, not analyzing us, not judging us or thinking we aren’t enough or that our shortcomings caused our suffering, but simply and profoundly is with us in the very depth of our weakness and pain.

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Kate Bowler recounts how hundreds of people offered her reasons for her cancer:

\* Because of her sin.

\* Because of unfaithfulness.

\* Because God is fair.

\* Because God is unfair.

\* Even because of her aversion to Brussels sprouts.

She writes these not to mock but to expose a deep discomfort we all share, which is the discomfort of not knowing.

We crave answers. Explanations make us feel in control. They help us distance ourselves from suffering—especially someone else’s—actually, especially our own as well.

If we can \*explain\* pain, then we don’t have to sit with it.

But Romans reminds us: the Spirit doesn’t explain. The Spirit groans.

Sometimes the most beautiful thing we can do is to sit beside someone and \*\*groan with them\*\*—to weep without answers, to wait in the mystery, and to trust in the presence of Holy Love.

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To know we have companionship in the deepest parts of our pain is a gift. I kind of wish Paul would have moved on to another a topic, but he keeps writing. We arrive at the verse that has both comforted and wounded many, the text that has been wrestled into a false meaning of “everything happens for a reason….”

 \*“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God’s purpose.”\* (Rom. 8:28)

First, let’s be clear: this is not saying that all things \*\*are\*\* good.

Cancer is not good. Tragedy is not good. Abuse is not good.

It also does not say that God (or the Universe, or whatever your understanding of a spiritual entity is) causes all things. It also doesn’t say there is a reason for all those things happening. Rather, what Paul is saying that in all things, God works. The Holy is present. The Greek verb for “work together” is συνεργεῖ (synergei). This comes from the noun that means synergy. God is in synergy with us, in concert with us in all of the things in our lives.

This is **not** an explanation; it is a promise. That even in the worst things, God does not abandon us. That even when we cannot pray, the Spirit is praying with us in our inability to pray. Even when feel like we are going under, that we aren’t going to make it through, God is in synergy with us, whether we KNOW it or not. Love is always faithful.

Let me be clear. God does not hand us reasons. What our ancients knew, what Paul was endeavoring to teach is that God gives us “presence.” A spirit that gets us when we don’t get ourselves, a presence who can pray for us when we are speechless. A God who understands suffering and pain. A Love in synergy with us.

So how do we love one another in a world where suffering is rampant, cruelty is baffling, hurt is real?

Not with answers.

Not with platitudes.

Not with spiritualized clichés.

Rather, we become the hands and feet and heart of Love—with our prayers, our juju, with our listening, with our heartbreak along with others’ groanings. By refusing to explain away someone’s pain and instead, enter into it with them.

As Bowler writes, “The only thing worse than failing to throw them a life preserver is handing them a reason.”

Let us throw life preservers—not explanations. Let us offer \*\*presence, patience, prayer\*\*—just as the Spirit does for us.

In our weakness, in our confusion, when the pain is too deep for words, we are not alone.

The Spirit is praying.

God is working.

Love is near.

Always.

And this is —not an answer—

Rather….

It is our hope.

Amen.

**READINGS**

“*Everything happens for a reason.”*

*The only thing worse than saying this*

*is pretending that you know the reason.*

*I*’*ve had hundreds of people*

*tell me the reason for my cancer.*

*Because of my sin.*

*Because of my unfaithfulness.*

*Because God is fair.*

*Because God is unfair.*

*Because of my aversion to Brussels sprouts.*

*I mean, no one is short of reasons….*

*When someone is drowning,*

*the only thing worse than failing to throw them a life preserver*

*is handing them a reason.”*

― Kate Bowler

excerpt from [Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved](https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/56457593)

**Romans 8: 26-28**

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes[a] with groanings too deep for words. And God,[b] who searches hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit[c] intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that all things work together[d] for good for those who love God, who are called according to God’s purpose.