

I find I just can't resist the temptation of a good online quiz. I know. It's a total time waster, and it probably introduces all kinds of malware onto my system -- don't worry, Allan (who manages our church software), I don't do it on the church computer -- but I can't help it. I may have ninety things on my plate and not nearly enough time to get to thirty of them... but darn it if I don't take five minutes for an online personality quiz that promises to reveal what kind of cheese I am or what "Downton Abbey" character I'm most like. (The answers are feta and Lord Grantham, respectively.)

One day, I happened on a quiz that had a bit more redemptive value. It was called "Scripture, Shakespeare, or Poor Richard?" The quiz included about twenty phrases, and the point of the quiz was to figure out which were verses from books of the Bible, which were lines from the plays of Shakespeare, and which were sayings by Benjamin Franklin. Now, church, I confess to some overconfident swagger. *I know the Bible*, I figured. *I've got a seminary degree on the wall to prove it! I should be able to nail this quiz.* So I clicked "play."

Real talk for a second: I have read my Bible from cover to cover. Every word. Even those long, kind of tedious parts that go on for verse after verse, telling you who begat whom begat whom. I've engaged in in-depth, masters-level study of the Bible. I've taught classes on the Bible. I continue to read the Bible for my own devotional purposes... and because it's my job. I read these words. I teach these words. I know these words. But I have to tell you... that quiz was hard! Harder than I thought it would be. I found myself getting confused, second-guessing myself, trying to sort out what was scripture and what wasn't.

In the end, though, I don't think that's all that uncommon. I have found that there are a lot of sayings that have long since made their way into "popular wisdom." We've heard them so many times that we no longer question them, and begin to repeat

them ourselves... and after a while, we even start to assume that we first came across them in the words of the Bible. And that's what we're going to be talking about in this sermon series. We're going to be talking about those sayings, those "verses" that people *think* are from the Bible... but in reality, are words of popular wisdom, or well-worn cultural platitudes, or lines from Shakespeare, or sayings from *Poor Richard's Almanac*. We're going to be talking about these "phantom Bible verses."

In my line of work, I come across these "phantom Bible verses" all the time. People will come up to me and ask, "Pastor, doesn't the Bible say... [insert phrase here]?" When people find themselves in an argument, for example, they might say, "Pastor, doesn't the Bible say 'forgive and forget'?" Does it? When people are going through a particularly tough time, they'll say, "Pastor, doesn't the Bible say that God never gives us more than we can handle?" Does it? And then, when people are struggling to find meaning in a difficult or tragic situation, they will say, "Pastor, doesn't the Bible say that everything happens for a reason?"

So does it? Does the Bible say that everything happens for a reason? You've heard it before, right? Maybe you've even said it before? When we say that, when we say "everything happens for a reason," we usually mean that everything happens for God's reasons, that everything that happens is somehow part of God's great and detailed and mysterious plan. But is that true? Does everything happen for a reason? Is it a biblical truth, or is it a phantom Bible verse? Let's explore that together... through the story of a man named Joseph.

We heard part of Joseph's story earlier today. Joseph is one of the sons of Jacob, and one of the heroes of the Old Testament. But he doesn't start out as a hero. He starts out as an annoying little brother who is clearly his father's favorite son. That would create enough dysfunction in any family... but it's about to get a little more

dysfunctional. You see, Joseph is a dreamer -- literally. He dreams a dream in which he and his older brothers are gathering sheaves of grain. In the dream, his sheaf stands upright, while his brothers' sheaves bow down to his. Subtle, right? The message is that Joseph will someday have power and authority over his older brothers... and that doesn't sit well with them. In their resentment and anger and insecurity, Joseph's brothers devise a plan to kill him and cover up the murder. But out in the wilderness, as they're about to carry out their plan, another option presents itself... and they choose, instead, to sell their own brother to a traveling band of slave-traders headed for Egypt.

In the years that pass, Joseph experiences both fortune and hardship, favor and abuse. Because of his wisdom and his ability to interpret dreams, he eventually rises to a position of great power, one in which he has influence over all of Egypt and even over Pharaoh himself. He is charged with interpreting Pharaoh's troubling dreams. In them, he finds a warning of impending famine, and so is able to plan ahead and act in ways that will save an entire nation (and most of the known world) from the threat of hunger and starvation. In an ironic twist, his actions even help to save his own brothers -- those who once conspired to kill him, who sold him into slavery -- from this famine.

Eventually, Joseph and these brothers come face to face. (That's the story we read earlier today.) It's a moving scene, that moment. It's a compelling passage of scripture... but also, I think, a potentially dangerous one, if we take it at face value. It's dangerous, I think, because of what Joseph says to his brothers (who now fear retribution from their once-wronged and now-powerful little brother). He says: "Now, don't be upset and don't be angry with yourselves that you sold me here. Actually, God sent me before you to save lives" (Genesis 45:5 CEB). *You didn't do this*, Joseph seems to be saying. *God did*.

That makes me nervous. It makes me nervous, because if we take these verses at face value like that, they seem to say: *God did all of this. The conspiracy, the slavery, the*

deceit, the imprisonment, the abuse, all of it. God did it. God caused it. It all happened for a reason. Everything happens for a reason. That's what these verses *seem* to say, at face value... but I believe that face-value reading is dangerous. I believe it gives us a false image of who God is and how God works and how human beings fit into all of that. I believe that face-value reading contradicts the truths that are conveyed by the Bible as a whole. So, church, we need to take a deeper look.

See, a face-value reading of Joseph's words seems to indicate that it was God who was really controlling things behind the scenes the whole time, like some great puppet master. And if that's true, if that's who God is, then that means that the human beings in the story aren't responsible for their own actions. And their actions are sinful, malicious, deceitful, evil. They plot murder. They sell their brother into slavery. They lie to their father about the fate of their brother. Are we really comfortable with saying that God planned and orchestrated these horrible things? That God *made* these things happen? That God was the *source* of this sin and suffering?

I'm not comfortable with that. I think the brothers *are* responsible for their actions. These are the things they *choose* to do. They are not puppets, with God pulling the strings. God is not forcing their hands or their hearts to sin. They are human beings, choosing to exercise their free will in this way against their own brother.

Free will is an important part of this story. It's an important part of our story. And it's an important part of this whole "everything happens for a reason" thing. As human beings, we each have free will. We are not God's puppets or God's robots. Our hands are not forced to act for good or evil. Our hearts are not forced to love or to hate. We are not forced. We are free. Each of us has the freedom to embrace God or to reject God, to act in harmony with God's will, or in conflict with God's will. God has given us that choice. God has given us free will. God has even given us grace to help us exercise

that free will in better and holier ways... but the fact remains: at the core of what it means to be human, and to be humans who can have a real relationship with God, is a little thing called “free will.”

So if we read Joseph’s story at face value, if we say that God directed the actions of the brothers from the very beginning, if we believe that God forced their hands to dump Joseph in a pit and sell him off to slave traders all as a means to some end (even a very good end)... then it contradicts the reality of free will. It is like denying the brothers their free will, and excusing their misuse of it. In the process, I think it minimizes our free will, too. And I’m not okay with that. I’m not okay with the “everything happens for a reason” interpretation of this passage. Try as I might, I just can’t find a way for this whole “everything happens for a reason” thing (that sounds good) to work with this “free will” thing (that I know to be true). They just don’t work together.

So, church, I propose a deeper reading of Joseph’s words. I propose that we read more of Joseph’s story, so that we can get a better sense of what his story is saying as a whole. So let’s first turn ahead, just a few chapters, to another encounter between Joseph and his brothers, just after the death of their father:

[Genesis 50:15-21, CEB]

¹⁵ When Joseph’s brothers realized that their father was now dead, they said, “What if Joseph bears a grudge against us, and wants to pay us back seriously for all of the terrible things we did to him?” ¹⁶ So they approached Joseph and said, “Your father gave orders before he died, telling us, ¹⁷ ‘This is what you should say to Joseph. “Please, forgive your brothers’ sins and misdeeds, for they did terrible things to you. Now, please forgive the sins of the servants of your father’s God.”’” Joseph wept when they spoke to him.

¹⁸ His brothers wept too, fell down in front of him, and said, “We’re here as your slaves.”

¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Am I God? ²⁰ You planned something bad for me, but God produced something good from it, in order to save the lives of many people, just as he’s doing today. ²¹ Now, don’t be afraid. I will take care of you and your children.” So he put them at ease and spoke reassuringly to them.

Hear Joseph's words again: "You planned something bad for me, but God produced something good from it, in order to save the lives of many people, just as he's doing today" (Genesis 50:20, CEB). In another version, this verse is translated: "Don't you see, you planned evil against me but God used those same plans for my good, as you see all around you right now – life for many people" (Genesis 50:20, MSG). *You planned evil against me but God used those same plans for my good.*

God used those same plans. Not *God caused those same plans* or *God forced those same plans* or *God preordained those same plans*. God used those same plans. Joseph's own brothers threw him into a pit and left him for dead, only to then sell him into slavery and lie to their father about it. God's not saying any of that was good. God's saying: *alright, yeah, I guess I can work with that.* As one biblical commentator writes: "God has 'taken over' what [the brothers] have done and used it to bring about this end. Their actions have *become* God's by being woven into his life-giving purposes."¹ God has taken it over. God didn't cause it, but God did use it... and that's a far cry from this whole "everything happens for a reason" thing.

It's important for us to get that right. It's not just semantics; we're not just parsing words. This difference makes all the difference... so it's important for us to get this right. It's important for us to get Joseph's story right... because in Joseph's story, we see our own stories. We see how God works in *our* lives and world. God will not thwart free will... but God will use whatever we do for God's greater purpose. If we do good and intend good, God can use it for greater good. If we do evil and intend evil, God can still use it and overcome it and transform it for good. Even our most evil or sinful actions do not have the last word in God's story. *God* has the last word... and that word

¹ Terence E. Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections" in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 1, ed. Leander E. Keck et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 644.

is a word of light and hope and love. Doesn't the cross, and along with it Easter's empty tomb, teach us that?

Church, I believe that God has a purpose, an intention, a will for us and for this world. But at the same time, I also believe that God frees us to make our own choices and to act according to our own free will. God frees us to do that, even though that runs the risk of us acting in conflict with God's intentions, with God's will. God is a risk-taker. But I also believe that this risk-taking God doesn't just give us free will, shrug, and walk away. I believe that God responds to -- and even redeems -- what we do. I believe God seeks to use anything that we do -- whether good or bad -- to bring about God's greatest purposes of goodness and justice and light and life.

So does everything happen for a reason? I don't think that's what the scriptures teach... certainly not if by saying "everything happens for a reason" we mean that God has *caused* all of these terrible things to happen as a means to an end, in order to achieve some greater good. "Everything happens for a reason?" Let's put that phantom Bible verse to rest... because the actual Bible says something so much better. "Everything happens for a reason?" No. Instead, let's say: "In everything that happens, and in everything we do, God will continue to work for good."