

“EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR A REASON.” (OR...NOT SO MUCH?)

by Brad Jersak and Dominic Jersak

Everything happens for a reason. But sometimes, that reason is you're stupid and you make bad decisions.
—Demotivational Meme

Thought Experiment

Response: “It was meant to be. Everything happens for a reason.”

Thought experiment: Describe the scenario that led to the response.

In our hypothetical scenario, something bad happened. Maybe not truly tragic—but somewhere in the flat tire to romantic break-up spectrum. Or if you're gutsy, you could go as severe as bankruptcy. Or as irrelevant as a traffic jam.

“It was meant to be.” A kind word of consolation.



I think this optimistic proverb needs a little deconstruction, because embracing it as a life philosophy backfires at the very worst times.

“Everything happens for a reason.” An appeal to a bigger picture, a higher power, a cosmic plan. And the reason is apparently a mystery, but probably something better than how circumstances seem on the surface.

For pastoral reasons that will become obvious, we think this optimistic proverb needs a little deconstruction, because embracing it as a life philosophy backfires at the very worst times.

Consolation or Setup?

Why do we go there? The motivational draw of this platitude is the comfort it offers. At first glance, it promises meaning (even

if hidden) to what feels like chaos. It offers the hope of a positive purpose behind random events. Some assign this plan and purpose to “universe,” others to “sovereignty” or “providence.”

But how relevant does an event need to be for us to summon a reason? Do we justify a traffic jam because it led to the perfect parking spot? Maybe you're not that petty. What if the traffic jam meant I missed a plane that crashes? Too

bad providence didn't cause *everyone* to miss the plane! Are only some worthy (“elect”) of sovereign favor?

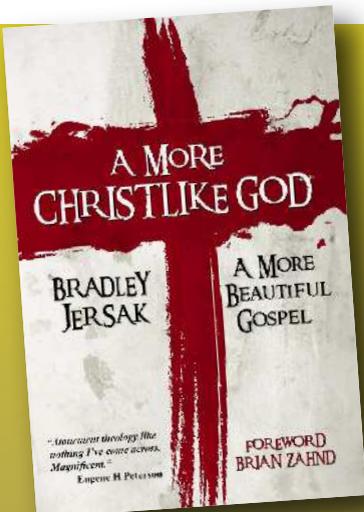
So maybe some events don't happen for any significant reason. They had a cause, no doubt, and likely also an *effect*. But what I might eat for breakfast or the fact that someone leaves the toilet seat up probably had no providential *purpose* of note. Even if you appeal

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to the “the butterfly effect” in chaos theory—where a butterfly’s wings cause a rippling series of effects that lead to a hurricane—this is not a *reason* for either. It’s just an equation. There’s no intent, which is what the original slogan implies.

Or as scientists and statisticians tell us, “correlation is not causation.” Just because the decrease in pirates over the last 130 years correlates to the rise in global temperatures, should we conclude that the lack of pirates caused climate change?¹

Is Calamity “Meant to Be”?

Moving from the trivial to the momentous, how far can you take this appeal to sovereign design? Let’s say it’s a matter of life and death...where surely

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human life warrants God’s “control.” Okay. Try these on:

A baby dies in miscarriage. *Everything has a reason?*

An infant dies of SIDS. *It was meant to be?*

A toddler drowns in the uncovered hot tub. *Everything has a reason?*

A child is abducted and murdered or stricken dead by leukemia. *It was meant to be?*

Oh, there are causes and effects all right, but God’s intent and purpose?

Last we checked, providence was supposed to be about “care.” If we imagine an interventionist God who ordains and governs every act—including evil, according to my Calvinist friends—he’s a

cruel one for sure. Just watch the news.

Toxic belief systems offer the comfort of God’s bigger plan, but then abandon you when that plan offers no redemptive purpose. And guess who gets thrown under the bus? God, of course. If *that’s* the kind of Father we have, no thanks!

The Blame Game

“Everything happens for a reason” was supposed to be redemptive, but when it’s not, maybe its bumper sticker philosophy still holds sway because it offers something else: someone to blame. It gets me off the hook of responsibility and defers it to God’s wisdom and judgment. But the blowback for

this move is horrendous. When calamity strikes, God is responsible, but sinners are to blame.

You’ve heard it repeatedly: HIV was sent by God, Hurricane Katrina was sent by God, the jets that hit the twin towers were sent by God (because *everything* is sent by God). And why would a good God send such catastrophes? To punish America of course (because it’s all about America). And why target America? It’s the homosexuals...*obviously!*

“Everything happens for a reason,” and when the “everything” is bad, it’s punishment—and if it’s punishment, it’s for sin. And the whodunit mystery begins

as it always has. Who gets to play Achan this time (Joshua 7-9)? Who’s the scapegoat going to be?

A Reason Happens for Everything

What if there is no redemptive *purpose* for trials and tragedies? What if bad stuff just *happens*? BUT also, causes and purposes aside, what if God is so good and his redemption so amazing that he can take the evils and afflictions (and even the scapegoating!) that he had *no part* in causing and *no intent* of inflicting—take them all up and into himself and transmute them into something good, even if that good must often await the hope of resurrection?

This is the message and meaning of the Cross: redemption, not because of your suffering, but because of what Christ can do by suffering with us.

So no, everything *does not* happen for a reason. No, it was not *meant to be*. But there is “a Reason *Who* happens for everything” (a twist coined by my friend Marv Wegner).

Christ takes ugly things and is able to make them beautiful, trumping evil intent and random accidents with a better purpose (Genesis 50:20) that must one day outshine the cruelest of fates (literally). To you Scripture says, “...our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18).

In the end, you are his redemptive purpose. □

1. Erika Anderson, “True Fact: the Lack of Pirates is Causing Global Warming,” *Forbes.com* (3/23/2012).