

Who is “They”? I don’t like “They”.

Before I begin, I exhort you to apply Acts 17:11. Don’t believe me just because I say it. Go find out if what I am saying is true.

The title for today’s writing comes from a statement I heard just this last week that has been on my mind quite a bit. The circumstances of life had brought this person to a position that that they, as we all do from time to time, railed against them. She was referencing the old proverb that “everything happens for a reason”. It is a quote that has many origins. Marilyn Monroe had said it when she said

"I believe that everything happens for a reason. People change so that you can learn to let go, things go wrong so that you appreciate them when they're right, you believe lies so you eventually learn to trust no one but yourself, and sometimes good things fall apart so better things can fall together."

In some ways, her quote is surprisingly insightful.

It is often a phrase tossed out there with half sincerity when things go wrong in another’s life in order to console them. It is my contention that this phrase that has been too simplified and the lack of biblical literacy in our modern world keeps us from understanding what I think is the real origin of this proverb.

In the Bible, it is written:

"This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds." (Hebrews 10:16)

This is derived from what is written in the book of Jeremiah:

Rather, this is the covenant that I’ll make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD. “I’ll put my Law within them and will write it on their hearts. I’ll be their God and they will be my people. No longer will a person teach his neighbor or his relative: ‘Know the LORD.’ Instead, they’ll all know me, from the least to the greatest of them,” declares the LORD. “Indeed, I’ll forgive their iniquity, and I’ll remember their sin no more.” (Jeremiah 31:33-34)

Beyond that, science itself has shown that at least a basic form of morality exists innately in humans and even primates. A 1964 study, by Frans de Waal, of Rhesus monkeys showed they would refuse to pull a chain that would give them food if they had learned it shocked another monkey. Go to any human culture in the modern world and you will find that certain morale constants exist. Murder is universally

frowned upon. So, too, stealing and cheating one another. This idea, also, that everything happens for some cosmological reason, exists. It is the driving force behind science. The strive to discover the cause for what is observed in the universe around us.

But where does the idea that someone or something is behind everything we observe in the universe? It was written on our hearts. Plainly we were told this in the Bible.

While the exact phrase “everything happens for a reason” does not appear in the biblical text, more precise explanations of the idea are. I will discuss them here in the hope that it will bring a new understanding of this concept to you, the reader.

I will clarify that I have not ever heard this phrase uttered in response to something good happening. It has always been as an attempt to comfort someone to which something bad has happened. Know then, that even without this proverb being discussed that bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people¹. In the end, justice will be served with sufficient mercy. It is an imperfect world brought on by the defiance in The Garden so long ago. Even that, however, was planned so that the glory of God could be revealed through his grace.

Take the story of Job, the oldest book in the bible. We can read it now from an outside observer’s perspective and see that what happened to Job had a greater purpose, but consider what it must have felt like from Job’s perspective without the extra data we are privy to today. Job had no clue that those particular events in his life would be used to edify saints to come for thousands of years. He had no idea that the cause of the evil in his life was from the direct intervention of Satan himself. From his perspective, he was doing everything right but lost his family, his riches and his health. Still, though, he says:

Even though he kills me,
I’ll continue to hope in him.
At least I’ll be able to argue my case to his face!
I have this as my salvation:
the godless person won’t be appearing before him.
Pay attention to what I have to say
and listen to my testimony with your own ears.” (Job 13:15-17)

When adverse circumstances come to your life, consider how you react to them. It is how you react that will determine your growth in character. Will you rail against the circumstances? Do you know how much the universe weighs? Do you know the father of the rain? Where were you when the foundations of the Earth were laid?

These are all rhetorical questions, of course. We don't know the full picture. Be assured, however, that God does not delight in the death of the wickedⁱⁱ, much less the death of those whom he loves. However, also know that while we do not know the reasons for controversy in our lives, reason does exist.

I am not attempting to claim that I have this lesson down and am above everyone else. I certainly fall short just like everyone else. One of my goals in life is to be like Paul when he wrote to the church in Philippi:

I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength. (Philippians 4:10-13)

It speaks to the concept of how to deal with adversity when it comes. It speaks of the trust we must have in the Lord of the Universe because we do not know the reason behind the events that happen to us. This doesn't make the loss of a loved one less painful but it does stave off despair that would come without such understanding. It is a part of that peace that surpasses understanding.

This same theme is found throughout the Bible. Jesus, himself told us:

"Two sparrows are sold for a penny, aren't they? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's permission. 30Indeed, even the hairs on your head have all been counted! 31So stop being afraid. You are worth more than a bunch of sparrows." (Matthew 10:29-30)

While we do not always have the reasons for personal adversity revealed to us, how we react to adversity is important. As Christians we are to live our life in such a way as to glorify Christ. Not just to know the word, but to live it. This is why Peter wrote to us saying:

Through faith you are being protected by God's power for a salvation that is ready to be revealed at the end of this era. You greatly rejoice in this, even though you have to suffer various kinds of trial for a little while, so that your genuine faith, which is more valuable than gold that perishes when tested by fire, may result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus, the Messiah, is revealed.

Though you have not seen him, you love him. And even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, because you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (I Peter 1:5-9)

Further, Jesus' own half-brother wrote to us regarding this very subject.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. (James 1:2-5)

So, who is “they”? “They” in the original proverb is the anonymous source of worldly wisdom, which you can’t rely on; but it is derived from divine wisdom. So, with the right perspective, “They” is the Lord. In that knowledge you can rest assured that while it still hurts to go through whatever trial you are facing, it is for a reason, even if you don’t know what that reason is.

5Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not depend on your own understanding.

ADDENDUM:

I am not perfect. I do not live this every single day myself. I struggle with it just like everyone else. The Lord is constantly finding new ways to teach me the lesson of trusting in Him. I hope that this writing comes as some help to someone out there.

Additionally, someone who has just lost a loved one or had their car smashed isn’t looking for a sermon on how everything has a reason. The knowledge and belief of that must come before the adversity so that while there is pain during the event, there is no lasting despair knowing that God is good and what man (and the devil) intends for evil, the Lord works toward good.

ⁱ As a personal note, I have found that my perspective has been corrected in this viewpoint. I used to often wonder why would God let bad things happen to good people. My thinking was corrected when I took the perspective to ask instead why good things happen to anyone at all. It is written that all have sinned and fallen short. It is also written that the wages of sin is death. Therefore, death is what we deserve, yet grace has been extended to us.

ⁱⁱ “Tell them, “As certainly as I’m alive and living,” declares the Lord GOD, “I receive no pleasure in the death of the wicked. Instead, my pleasure is that the wicked repent from their behavior and live. Turn back! Turn back, all of you, from your wicked behavior! Why do you have to die, you house of Israel? (Ezekiel 33:11)