



MYERS PARK
BAPTIST
CHURCH

A faith community
on a journey seeking
a welcoming, loving,
and just world.

“EVERYTHING HAPPENS...”

Delivered by Dr Reverend Tim Moore

Romans 8:26-28, August 23, 2026

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Kate Bowler, a Duke Divinity School professor, titled her battle with Stage Four cancer memoir, *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I Loved*, because in addition to telling her compelling story, she wanted to rebuke that harmful cliché. When folks talk about facing challenges or difficulties it—everything happens for a reason—is often repeated. And while I appreciate how that phrase sometimes helps people in a dark spot or when facing life’s challenges to keep up their struggle and resolve, hoping they will find a reason for the challenge they are facing. While I can appreciate that it can help some people, and if it has helped you, I’m glad. But **I have to say as a theological phrase—everything happens for a reason—is a bunch of garbage and on top of that it is not biblical.**

Everything does not happen for a reason. Think with me for a minute. **Do we want to say that the Holocaust happened for a reason?** Do we want to say that murdering 6 million Jewish persons and 4 million others as a part of Nazi concentration death camps happened for a reason? Or what about the killing fields of Cambodia near the end of the Vietnam war? Or apartheid in South Africa? When white Afrikaners put gasoline dowsed tires over Black South Africans, whose arms were tied behind their backs and then set them on fire, do we want to say that happened for a reason?

Of course not, those things were barbaric, horrible, terrible deeds done against humanity. And they did not happen for a reason. They happened because human beings did terrible, inhumane things.

The question, “Why do bad things happen to good people?”, in one sense has a really easy answer. **Bad things happen to good people because bad things happen, period. To everyone.**

When you are baptized God doesn’t remove a cancer gene from your DNA. If you keep the Ten Commandments and work really hard to be a good and faithful person, God does not change the law of gravity for you. Following Jesus won’t make a tornado jump around your house and hit the house of your neighbor who hasn’t been to church in years. That’s not the way it works.

This question, “Why do bad things happen to good people?”, is good to ask. It’s the same question that Job and Jeremiah asked. It’s in the Psalms and the book of Ecclesiastes. This question is as old as the Bible and in fact is a part of the Bible

One of my favorite movies is the Shawshank Redemption, originally a book by Stephen King. The leading character is Andy Dufresne, played by Tim Robbins, who was wrongfully convicted of murdering his wife and sentenced to prison for life. On the one hand Tim Robbins’ character chalks up his misfortune to bad luck. **“I was just in the path of the tornado,”** he says. But then he confesses that he never thought it would last two decades.

Surely, his innocence would come to light and his bad luck would run out. But it had not. He briefly wonders if he was paying for some past sin or regret. No, he concludes, he had paid for his mistakes and then some. Andy Dufresne becomes a Job-like character—someone in the Bible who had lost everything. There was no “reason” why he had lost everything, he was just in the path of the tornado. Now, he wanted out of the prison and his life back.

Morgan Freeman’s character tells him to stop thinking like that. He couldn’t change what had happened to him and he was stuck in prison. To which Andy responded with one of the best lines in the movie—he’d better get busy living or get busy dying—which shifted the movie to its final plot twist: Andy’s escape from prison.

Andy Dufresne is like Job in the Bible. Job lost all his children, all his fortune, his business, his house. He even lost his health. Only his wife remains—but all she does is nag him to curse God and die. His so-called friends keep telling him that his sins have brought on his bad fortune. But Job calls them windy words. Even though his prayers had not changed the course of his life, Job hoped that one day, somehow, his plight would be brought before God.

The Apostle Paul struggled to understand why bad things happen as well. Throughout Chapter 8, he is struggling to understand where is God in difficult moments. He wrote a verse to the Romans that has brought both comfort and pain. **“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” That’s how it reads in most English Bibles, that’s not how we printed it today in the Order of Worship.**

Some people have looked at those words and it helps them believe that something good will come out of their tragedy and heartache. Helps them believe some higher purpose is behind their pain. Other people have looked at those words and seeing no good coming from their tragedy and heartache conclude that they must not be called according to God’s purpose. It heaps divine insult upon their injury.

How could one sentence bring so much comfort and also so much heartache? Well, in part, it’s because of the way it is translated. If you have a NRSV, you will see a footnote is tagged to that verse. That’s because some ancient manuscripts had the words in a different order.

Some ancient manuscripts say, “God makes all things work together for good.” This is the way that the NIV translates the verb. **This is a little better in that at least here God is the subject** and not all things which magically work themselves together for good.

The footnote also says that other manuscripts say, “In all things God works for good...” This is basically how the Revised Standard Version translated the verse, which has made me wonder why the New Revised went back to how the KJV did it.

We are not simply talking about translation differences. This is not, “You say toMAtoe; I say TOmatoe,” or one scholar says the Greek word means this and another scholar says it means that, as if they are trying to decide which ice cream flavor tastes better.

The footnotes tell us that some ancient copies of Romans show Paul writing the words in one order and other copies showing a different order. Since we do not have Paul’s handwritten copy, we can’t say with 100% certainty which was the way Paul originally wrote it.

Scholars then have to decide which order was more likely. **It is interesting that the 4 most popular English versions of the Bible in the last 100 years have picked three different versions based on the three different orders found in ancient manuscript copies.**

The words are not in dispute. It is their order that is in dispute. **But this is not an argument about grammar. It is about theology**—primarily the nature of God and how God works in a world where terrible things happen.

The words we dealing with are: **1) all things, 2) work together (cooperate), 3) God, and 4) for good.** If we go back to verse 18. Paul writes, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.” In the following verses he is writing about how living in this world brings troubles with it—things like disease and natural disaster, not to mention human mistakes, which bring their own heartache. He is also suggesting that following Jesus, living the Christian life also brings a certain level of challenge.

For instance, when you are standing for honesty when everyone else wants to cheat, well, your stand for following Jesus will bring some unwanted trouble.

Paul’s word of encouragement is that one day God’s kingdom will come and then our days of trouble will be over. “For in hope we were saved,” he writes in verse 24.

Then, he comes back to the suffering of life. He notes that sometimes things can get so bad—death, depression, hopelessness, shame, tragedy—that we do not even know what to say, how to pray, where to begin. It is then, when we don’t know what to do, that the Holy Spirit intercedes between God and us. The Holy Spirit of God listens to us. Listens when we don’t even have words to say. And the Spirit prays for us – with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart... and intercedes for the saints.

So, in verses 18 through 27, Paul has already been writing about the “all things” and he has noted that some of these “all things” bring suffering. But in all those verses the “all things” have not been the subject. **They have not been in control.** They have not been driving the plot and the narrative. **God has.** God is the one who helps us in our weakness. God is the one who listens to our hearts and knows them. God is the one who intercedes.

Since God has been the subject, the action figure of verses 18 through 27, not to mention verses 29 through 39, why wouldn’t God be the subject of verse 28? The verses before and after verse 28 suggest all things do NOT work together for good, for we do not believe that fate rules the universe. **We do not believe that all things just magically work together for good. We are guided by faith in God, not by fate.**

So, if it is God who is working together for good, where does “all things” go in this sentence?

My former pastor, Dr. R.F. Smith, Jr., knew something about tragedy and heartache. His only son, Forest, died at age 17 in a water-skiing accident. His son was one year older than me. His oldest daughter, Becky, who was a Morehead scholar at UNC, when her brother died, gave birth to two children with severe special needs. It is hard to know if her first-born ever really was able to consciously connect with the world around him. Later, she was struck by disease and lost the use of her legs 25 years ago.

When R.F. talked about the intersection of faith and hardship, I listened. He and his family walked through tragedy and hardship. **Romans 8:28 was one of his favorite verses in the Bible. In his book, *Sit Down God... I'm Angry*, he called that verse one of the hallmarks of this theology.**

He looked at the death of his son, the shell of a life of his grandson, his daughter's paralysis and did not see the hand of God bringing heartache and tragedy into his life. He didn't see God making those things happen to teach him some lesson or for some higher purpose. He did see that his family was exposed to the same joys and sorrows of life that can befall any of us. The "sufferings" that Paul spoke of in verse 18. The "all things" of verse 28 was the setting of life as it was for the setting of this passage in Romans. **God was the subject and all things was the setting.**

Now in all the tragic things that he experienced he did see God. Not in the tragedy itself. Not in some higher purpose that never materialized. **He saw God picking up the pieces of his life and the life of his family.**

Does everything work out for good? No, of course not. But here's a reading of Romans 8:28 that speaks of hope and not judgment, of faith and not fate.

"We know that in all things God works for good"—which is how it's in your Order of Worship.

Does everything work out for good? No. But in everything that happens God is working in our lives to bring good out of it. This is the God, remember, that Paul said helps us in our weakness and when things are so bad that we do not know how to pray intercedes on our behalf with sighs too deep for words, and this God, who searches and knows our hearts, then in all the things that we face works in our lives to bring good out of bad, hope out of despair, faith out of doubt, love out of hate.

Paul was not trying to tell the Roman Christians that everything was going to be all right with their lives. **He was trying to tell them that no matter what happens in their lives God would help them patch their broken lives back together, again.**

My pastor once said that after his son's death he realized that some things are broken beyond repair.

After God kept working in his life trying to work some good back into his life he had a second realization. **Some things are broken beyond repair, but they are never broken beyond use.**

Does everything work out for good? No. But I know that in all the things of my life God is working to bring good out of even the worst things and working to bring good back into my life.

Get busy living, or get busy dying. Why don't we get busy joining God to bring good out of the worst things in life? AMEN

Biblical theology says that bad things happen because God has given humanity freedom to choose, and placed humanity in a world where options and consequences and rewards exist.

One of the prices we pay for creative freedom is that bad things happen. Bad things that are caused by human beings making terrible decisions. And nature has creative freedom as well. The evolutionary way God has made the world has brought stunning diversity in plant and animal life. And all this variety and color and beauty is made possible because as cells replicate over and over and over again, sometimes they mess up. And sometimes these mistakes give a plant or an animal an advantage and they pass that onto the next generation. Long term that's how God made this spectacular world. But in the short term, bad things can happen due to the evolutionary process of the world. Cells replicate by the thousands day after day after day. It's only a matter of time before some imperfectly divide—bringing disease, cancer, defects. Or think of it this way, clouds fill up with moisture and empty as rain thousands of times around the world day after day after day. It's only a matter of time before one collection of clouds turn into tornados or flooding rains.

The reason bad things happen to good people and bad people and all people in between is because God gave humans and nature creative freedom. God does not cause bad things to happen. God did create us mortal and put us in this wondrous world full of freedom. If you want to get mad at God for doing that. Take your complaints to God. Job sure did and God loved him the same. But God did not make bad things happen to Job, or to any of us.

Bad things that happen to us are meaning-less, until God helps us pull meaning from them.