

## **What We Believe...About God's Providence**

### **Daniel 4:34-37**

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We continue this morning in our series “What We Believe”, that is, we’re talking about basic beliefs we hold as Christians. In talking about various beliefs, we’re not simply trying to increase our knowledge, although I hope our knowledge will grow. But as the Apostle Paul said in I Corinthians 8:1, knowledge can ‘puff up’, that is, cause us simply to become full of ourselves, prideful – a “look how smart I am” kind of attitude. That’s not what we’re after. We want to increase our understanding of what we believe, not just to be smarter, but to be able to live more fully for and more obediently to the Lord.

Our topic today, God’s providence, is an excellent example of this. God’s providence has been defined as the “continued exercise of the divine energy whereby the Creator preserves all His creatures, is operative in all that comes to pass in the world, and directs all things to their appointed end” (L. Berkof). Simply put, that means, first, that God is actively preserving what He’s created. It may not seem like it because we see things erode, volcanos explode and destroy areas, tidal waves wash areas away, etc. But Scripture is clear that God is “sustaining all things by His powerful word” (Hebrews 1:3) and that in Jesus “all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17). In other words, were it not for God’s preserving action, sin would have long ago brought destruction to the world.

So God’s providence preserves us but the definition also said that He is “operative in all that comes to pass in the world”. In contrast, there is a school of thought called “Deism”, which basically acknowledges that God created the world but then says He steps back and lets things go without intervening further, much like a child might wind up a toy car and then set it on the floor to watch it move without touching it. God’s providence, on the other hand, says that He is actively involved in everything that takes place. There is no area of life - from the great movements of nations and history to whether you’ll take a drive this afternoon - there is no area of life which happens apart from His involvement.

God’s providence isn’t simply looking forward and seeing what’s going to happen and reacting to it. He preserves us, He is active in all that happens and the last part of that definition said He “directs all things to their appointed end”. That is, God has a plan and He is working out literally everything to accomplish that plan.

Now, the fact that God is sovereign, or has complete authority and control, over all of life may sound great to you or it may raise a host of questions – am I just a puppet in God’s great schemes, does God really care whether I wear a blue shirt or a green one, if God is in control then why does evil happen, etc. And admittedly, these questions don’t have simple answers. But when we talk about God’s providential control of all things, I like to begin with the testimony of Scripture and ask, “Where in

Scripture do we see God's power being limited, either by forces bigger than Him or by God Himself saying, in effect, 'I'm not going to be in control of these things'? And I would submit that we *never* see God's power limited in any way, He is *always* in control. Let's run through some evidences for this quickly.

God's providential control is seen over the *universe* (Psalm 103:19 "The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all."), over the *physical world* (Matthew 5:45 "...He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."), over the *affairs of nations* (Acts 17:26 "From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live."), over *our birth and life* (Psalm 139:16 "your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."), over *successes and failures* (Psalm 75:7 "But it is God who judges: He brings one down, he exalts another."), over *things seemingly accidental or insignificant* (Proverbs 16:33 "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD." & Matthew 10:30 "And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered."), in *protecting the righteous* (Psalm 4:8 "I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety."), in *supplying our needs* (Philippians 4:19 "And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus."), in *giving answers to prayer* (Psalm 65:2 "O you who hear prayer, to you all men will come."), and in the *punishment of the wicked* (Psalm 11:6,7 "[6] On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur; a scorching wind will be their lot. [7] For the LORD is righteous, he loves justice; upright men will see his face.").

Now we could give numerous additional Bible passages for each one of those areas, examples of God doing those things. Think of Him rescuing the Israelites from Pharaoh, think of Him providing food and water for the Israelites in the wilderness, think of Him plucking David out of obscurity to be king, think of Him moving the rulers of the Medes and Persians to return the Israelites to their homeland, on and on we could go. I'm sure you can see that the picture the Bible gives is not one of a God who sits up in heaven with arms folded, watching passively as history plays out as it will without His involvement. Instead we find a God with limitless power, actively engaged in the affairs of nations and individuals, moving the course of events according to His purposes.

But I don't want you to think God's control is just back in Bible times. Pastor Chuck Swindoll shared the following story about a Christian leader who started a new ministry for the Navigators in Uganda. The man went to Uganda to get a feel for the country. He came into a village where he was going to spend his first night and saw several young kids with automatic weapons, shooting them off into the sky. As he drove by, they stared at him and pointed their guns. Naturally he started to wonder if God was really in their decision.

He pulled up to a dingy, dimly lit hotel. Inside, the clerk, who spoke only a little English, told him there was one bed available. So he walked up two flights of stairs and opened the door and turned on the light and saw a room with two beds, one unmade

and one still made up. He immediately realized, *I am sharing this room with somebody else*. A chill went down his spine. At this point he definitely needed the kind of encouragement only God can give. He dropped to his knees and prayed, ‘Lord, look, I’m afraid. I’m in a country I don’t know. I have no idea who sleeps in that bed. Please, show me that you’re in this move!’” And then, he said, “Just as I was finishing my prayer, the door flung open, and there stood this six-foot five-inch African frowning at me, saying in beautiful British English, ‘What are you doing in my room?’” ‘They gave me this bed, but I’ll only be here one night.’” “What are you doing in my country?” the African asked. “Well, I’m with a [Christian] organization called the Navigators.” “Ahh! The Navigators!” Suddenly the tall African broke into an enormous grin, threw his arms around his new roommate, and laughed out loud as he lifted him up off the floor and danced around the room with him. “Praise God, praise God,” said the African. “For two years I have prayed that God would send someone to me from this organization.” And he pulled out a little Scripture memory-verse pack and pointed to where, at the bottom of each of the verses, it read, “The Navigators, Colorado Springs, Colorado.” This Ugandan eventually became a board member for the new Navigators ministry in Uganda. He helped the American leader find a place to live, assisted him with the language, and became the Navigator staff member’s best friend.

If that kind of thing happened just once we might be tempted to call it “chance” or “fate” but in researching this sermon I came across any number of similar stories, where God’s unmistakable hand had so obviously orchestrated the events exactly as He wanted them. I’m sure that if we shared among ourselves, many of *us* could tell similar stories of God closing this door, opening that door, causing certain things to happen at certain times to accomplish His purposes in our lives as well.

And we take comfort in God’s sovereign control. Unless we believe God is in control of everything, why even pray? There is no such thing as being “partially sovereign” or “almost in control of everything” but if there were, what confidence could we have that God could do anything about the circumstances of our life? No, God is in complete control of everything and for that we can be glad.

All this is not to say that God doesn’t use ordinary laws of nature to control things. For example, He created gravity and it operates under His control but He doesn’t have to individually hold each of us down to earth. The moon’s pull controls tides on earth, pressure changes control the movement of air, clouds form and rain falls all according to natural forces but of course, God is free to use these natural forces or interrupt them whenever He chooses.

Some argue that if God is in complete control, then why does evil exist and doesn’t it make God responsible for evil acts? The Bible is clear that God can use even evil for His purposes, as He did when Joseph was sold by his brothers into slavery and then falsely accused and imprisoned, yet years later being elevated to a position of power that saved many from starvation. Genesis 50:20 put it this way, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” The book of Judges is full of instances where God used the evil

impulses of enemy nations to chastise His own people for their sinfulness.

God is holy and so does not sin (I John 3:5), nor does He make people sin (James 1:13) but theologians speak of the “permissive will” of God, where God allows people to follow their own sinful tendencies, which again He uses to accomplish His will. How God can be in complete control of all things without being in some way involved in sinful acts is a mystery theologians have wrestled with for ages. No less a scholar than John Calvin said that this “is a secret manifestly far too deep to be penetrated by the human mind, nor am I ashamed to confess our ignorance. And far be it from any of the faithful to be ashamed to confess his ignorance of that which the Lord envelopes in the blaze of His own inaccessible light.”

As to the question that God’s sovereignty somehow makes us puppets merely playing out God’s will, I can only say that the Bible never pictures us in that way. Throughout the Bible men and women make choices based on their wills and are held accountable for their actions. The two truths – that God is in control and yet we act according to our wills – are both presented side by side and the Bible makes no attempt to resolve them. It’s a paradox that we will probably wrestle with until we’re in heaven and can ask the Lord Himself to explain it to us. But such paradoxes exist even in the physical world. For example, science tells us that light can be thought of as “waves” or “particles” – both are valid ways of understanding how light travels. So it’s no surprise that in the spiritual realm we can also have two truths that seem contradictory but are each supported by the biblical evidence.

The fact of God’s providential control is meant to be a great source of comfort to us, though. Pastor John Piper said, “God is not just showing up after the trouble and cleaning it up. He is plotting the course and managing the troubles with far-reaching purposes for our good and for the glory of Jesus Christ.”

In some ways, God’s providential control of all things reminds me of a tapestry. From the top side, the threads of the tapestry form a beautiful design or picture. From the bottom side, those same threads look like a jumble with no discernable pattern. In the same way, I believe God looks “down” and sees how all the elements of His plan fit together to make a beautiful picture in our lives but from our point of view, we may not be able to see anything more than a jumble of “threads”, events in our lives going this way and that with no apparent rhyme or reason. It may take a long time for God’s “picture” to emerge; in fact, we may not see it until we’re with Him in eternity. But rest assured, it is there and God is weaving His design in our lives with a sure and steady hand, because He is in control of all things.

Even the pagan King Nebuchadnezzar, after enduring humiliation as a judgment from God for his pride, was forced to acknowledge God’s complete authority, saying, “[34] At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation. [35] All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He

does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?" (Daniel 4:34, 35).

In an age such as ours where God is relegated to the back seat, if He is given a seat at all in the scheme of life, recover by the testimony of Scripture the greatness of God, His majesty, His glory, His power, His control of all things. This is the God in whose hands I want to place my life, my family's life, my church's life, my friend's lives, and indeed, my hope for eternity.