

GOD IS SOVEREIGN

(Daniel 4:35; Ruth 2:1-3)

Good morning! We're on the third part of the 10-part message series we're calling "God is". In this series, we're looking at knowing more about God in order to satisfy not only our mental curiosity but also to strengthen our faith in our wonderful God and apply principles we're learning about God in our daily lives. In the first message, I talked about God is Self-Existent. That is, he is eternal, he was never created, and as such he is our creator and, therefore, he loves us dearly and we are special in his eyes. Then, last week, RJ talked about God is Immutable, meaning, he never changes. And that's why he is always forgiving, merciful and loving.

Today, I'm going to talk about the topic of "God is Sovereign". According to the dictionary, it means possessing supreme or ultimate power. Its synonyms are absolute, unlimited, unbounded, dominant, total, unrestricted, utter, paramount, principal, and all superlatives you can think of. We use this word to describe a king or emperor or a head of state. But really, they are nothing compared to God because they are mere mortals. Emperors and kings and monarchs all die and while living, they can be overthrown. But only God can continue to rule and reign because he is eternal, and he never changes.

This attribute of sovereignty by God is best described by Daniel in Daniel 4:35, "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?'" I think that's self-explanatory.

Now, intertwined with this attribute of God is the doctrine of divine providence. This doctrine states that God governs the entire universe with wisdom and love, and he cares for and directs all things in the universe.

Moreover, this doctrine asserts that God is in complete control of all things. Everything that is happening in this world and even in your own life, God knows and he is in total control. There's never a moment when he is not in control. So, this stands in complete opposite to the idea that the universe is governed by chance or fate.

BTW, did you hear the news, just this morning, that Israel is changing its name? According to the Jewish Parliament, the international recognition of Jewish sovereignty is so bad that they decided to rename their country "It's real"! BTW, it's not by chance I inserted that joke.

Anyway, going back to sovereignty, it is because of God's providence that he accomplishes his will which we call his sovereign will. Now, how does this relate to human will? Some claim that if God exercised his sovereign will, how can we as humans exercise our own will? Do we even have freedom to exercise our own will? Can we make choices in life if in the end it is God's will that's going to be accomplished?

This is an age-old problem that theologians and philosophers and even ordinary Christians continue to debate. Truth is, we'll never know the true answer on this side of eternity. This is hidden from us. It's a mystery. It's something we cannot comprehend because it belongs only to God. He is sovereign, right? But this is what we know. We see examples of both truths in Scripture. As God directs the affairs of nations and people, he also allows them to make personal choices. We're going to see an example of this later on as we look at the life of Ruth.

So, the doctrine of divine providence teaches us some important truths:

First, God cares about the tiniest details of life. Nothing escapes his notice, for he is concerned about the small as well as the big. In fact, with God there is no big or small. He knows when a sparrow falls, and he numbers the hairs on your head and those that remain on your head, if any.

He sets the day of your birth, the day of your death, and he ordains everything that comes to pass in between. Psalm 139:1-4 says, “You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely.”

Second, God uses everything and wastes nothing. There are no accidents with God, only incidents. This includes events that seem to us to be senseless tragedies. Romans 8:28 says, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

Third, God intends to shape his children into the image of Jesus Christ. He often uses difficult moments and human tragedies to accomplish that purpose. Romans 8:29 says, “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.”

So, because there’s a purpose in everything that God does and his purposes are always for the good of his people, unlike many human sovereigns who look only after themselves, nothing happens by chance. Ever. In the words of R.C. Sproul, “God doesn’t roll dice.”

With that as background, let’s turn to the book of Ruth 2:1-3. Now, before we read this, in the first chapter, we see how in a time of famine Elimelech moved his family to Moab, which is a foolish decision. While they were in pagan territory, Elimelech and his two sons die. Ten years later Naomi, Orpah and Ruth prepare to travel to Bethlehem. Orpah returns to Moab, but Ruth pledges her loyalty to Naomi. Together the two widows—one old and one young—return to Bethlehem at the start of the barley harvest, about April to May. Naomi feels like God has abandoned her because she left Bethlehem full and returned empty.

As Ruth chapter 1 ends, we can sense that “something” is about to happen, but what is it? How will the story unfold? If it’s true that joy comes in the morning, Naomi feels like she is trapped at midnight. Where is the sunlight of God’s kindness? *The first three verses of Ruth 2 begin to unfold the answer.* As we study this passage, we can see how God’s providence works behind the scenes to accomplish something truly amazing for Naomi and Ruth.

Let me read these verses: “Now Naomi had a relative on her husband’s side, a man of standing from the clan of Elimelek, whose name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, ‘Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor.’ Naomi said to her, ‘Go ahead, my daughter.’ So she went out, entered a field and began to glean behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she was working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelek.”

We have the benefit of reading the story from back to front. That is, we know how it ends. *But neither of the widows has the slightest idea of what is about to happen.* Here’s the question: How does God’s providence work in the lives of ordinary people like Naomi and Ruth?

First, He Prepares the People

Again, in verse it says, “Now Naomi had a relative on her husband’s side, a man of standing from the clan of Elimelek, whose name was Boaz.” (v. 1).

So far in the book of Ruth there hasn’t been much good news. Hardly any, in fact. You have an ill-advised trip to Moab, three funerals, three widows, and a sad trip back to Bethlehem. Naomi thinks God has treated her harshly. The only bright spot has been Ruth’s declaration of devotion to her mother-in-law. But remember that they returned at the start of the barley harvest (Ruth 1:22). That might not seem like good news, but it meant things were about to change.

Ruth is one of the most beautiful short stories ever written. *Every detail counts.* Nothing is added as filler. The beginning of the barley harvest alerts us to the changing fortunes of life. No matter what yesterday was like, we never know what tomorrow may bring. Anything can happen because anything happens all the time.

That's the background of this verse. In this first mention of Boaz, we learn he is related to Elimelek. Later we will discover he is qualified to be a "kinsman-redeemer," but for the moment, all we know is that he and Elimelek are related somehow. We also know he is a man of high standing in the community. The phrase "noble character" can also mean something like "mighty warrior" or even "man of great wealth." Perhaps all three of those ideas come together in Boaz—he is a man of character, a mighty warrior, and a man of wealth. *He is the right man in the right place at the right time, but he doesn't know it yet.* He has heard about Ruth's incredible devotion to Naomi, but at this point he's never met her.

Verse 1 foreshadows the story that will begin to play out. Although Naomi came back home deeply discouraged, feeling she had no future, God has been at work behind the scenes. Now his plan is about to unfold in a most unlikely way.

Have you heard of the term "the preventient grace of God"? The phrase refers to "the grace that goes before." It means that in every situation God is already at work before I get there.

We often limit our thinking to the fact that God's presence goes with us as we go through life. That's true, but it's only part of the story. He's not only with us now, he's also way up the road ahead of us. Let me say it another way: *While I'm living in Tuesday, he's clearing the road for me on Friday.* Or to say it yet another way: *God is already at work providing solutions for problems I don't even know I have yet.*

Are you worried about next week? Forget it. He's already there. How about next year? Don't sweat it. He's already there. What about that crucial meeting next week? Sleep well. He's already there. What about that tough decision that looms ahead of you? Fear not. He's already there.

It would be enough if God simply walked with us through the events of life. But he does much more than that. He goes ahead of us, clearing the way and arranging the details of life so that when we get there, we can have confidence he has already been there before us.

That's the prevenient grace of God. He goes before his people. He's at work in the future while we live in the present.

Though Naomi didn't know it, and wouldn't have believed it, God was at work during all those hard days in Moab. *He was preparing Boaz to come to the rescue at just the right moment.* And remember, Boaz didn't know it either. Ruth certainly had no idea. Each person did as they pleased, yet it all worked out the way God intended.

That's how providence works. *He prepares the people even when they don't know they are being prepared.* He works in ways we can't see to accomplish his plan through us.

So, God's providence works by first, he prepares the people, then

Second, He Arranges the Plan

Verse 2 says, "And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, 'Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor.'"

Ruth and Naomi came back home broke. They were living somewhere below the poverty line, which is a dangerous place to be if you are a widow. But Ruth has a plan. She asks for permission to go to the field and gather fallen grain. There are several things we need to keep in mind at this point.

First, Ruth is younger than Naomi and no doubt in better physical condition. Gleaning in the fields was hot, hard, backbreaking work. It meant hours spent following the reapers, hoping to pick up a fallen stalk here or there.

Second, God commanded his people to leave some grain in the field so that the poor would have something to eat.

“When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands” (Deuteronomy 24:19).

In order to make the point clear, God commanded the same thing regarding olives in verses 20 and 21. That’s what happened in Ruth 2.

*Third, Ruth shows her character by not wallowing in self-pity. She’s ready to work hard to provide for herself and for Naomi. We might state the principle this way: **Do what you have to do each day and trust God for the right results.** Ruth moved to meet her basic needs by picking grain left by the reapers. That’s menial labor, but she wasn’t afraid to do it.*

Now, Ruth doesn’t have a scheme in mind to catch a husband. She’s not thinking, “If I work in the fields, maybe I’ll meet my future husband that way.” This is not the Old Testament version of eHarmony. She’s desperate to provide food for herself and for Naomi. As we will discover later, God uses her diligence as part of his plan.

So, the way divine providence works is that first, God prepares the people, second, he arranges the plan, and

Third, He Oversees the Result

Now, we come to verse 3, **“So she went out, entered a field and began to glean behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she was working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelek.”**

Let's start with the fact that Ruth entered "the field." That refers to a large tract of land divided among various people. Eliezer might have the far northern section and Caleb might have a section in the southeastern corner, Jacob would grow crops on the western edge, and somewhere in the middle you had the property of Boaz. The owners used stones or other markers to indicate the various property lines.

That means Ruth had no idea whose property she might be on at any given moment. *From her point of view, she merely happened to end up on the part of the large field owned by Boaz.* The King James uses a delightful phrase: "Her hap was to light." That's old-fashioned, but it gets the point across. The CEB says, "by chance," while other translations say, "It just so happened." The writer wants us to know Ruth never set out to glean in Boaz's field. She didn't do it by design. She was ignorant of the matter.

That's true from a purely human point of view, but we know there is no such thing as luck or chance or fate. *Nothing in the universe ever "just happens."* I love these words by Alva J. McClain: "From the fall of a raindrop to the fall of an empire, all is under the providential control of God." In other words, God oversees the tiniest details of life. Nothing happens apart from God.

This passage demonstrates how God works behind the scenes to accomplish his will. Only the Lord knows what will happen next. Boaz hasn't met Ruth, and Ruth isn't planning on meeting Boaz. Naomi has no idea Boaz and Ruth will one day get married. She certainly doesn't foresee holding a baby in her arms. She had no idea that God was putting affairs in motion that will put Ruth the Moabite maiden in the line of the Messiah.

Folks, one lesson we can learn here is that *God's will usually come to us like a sunrise, not like a sunburst.* It doesn't suddenly appear before us, like the sun shining at noonday.

The will of God rises slowly before our eyes, starting with a few rays of light that pierce the darkness. We see a shaft of light here and another one there, but mostly we walk in darkness. As we keep walking, light slowly fills the sky until at last the darkness has vanished, and we are walking in the sunlight of God's will.

Something like that is happening for Ruth, Naomi and Boaz. Little shafts of light are rising in the darkness. Soon the light will fill the sky as God's plan begins to take shape. All they need to do is **watch, wait and obey**. Those are three key words we must always keep in mind and heart. Watch, wait and obey.

Now, each step they take takes them closer to the destination God intended from the beginning. That's how providence works—for them and for us. Providence doesn't guarantee easy or immediate answers, but it assures us there are answers and that we are not walking blindly through life, left to our own devices. It tells us that through our good times and through our hard times, through our wisdom and through our folly, through our laughter and through our tears, God is working out his plan for us. Folks, the God who took care of Ruth, Naomi and Boaz is our God too. We can trust him.

Charles Spurgeon said: "Blessed is that man who seeth God in trifles!" *What a positive insight that is.* We tend to look at the million-dollar answer to prayer and say, "What a mighty God we serve." *But the God of the large is also the God of the small.* The God who hung the stars in space is also the God who numbers the hairs on your head. Why should it surprise us that God arranges for Ruth to "happen" to glean in the field owned by Boaz?

You see, *circumstances are the fingerprints of God.* No one saw it clearly that day in Bethlehem. Ruth didn't see it, Naomi didn't see it, and neither did Boaz. God's plan would only become clear later. That's the way life is for all of us. As John Piper puts it, God is doing perhaps 10,000 things in your life right now.

You understand maybe 3 of those things. We can't imagine all the different ways God is working all things for our own good and his glory. Or we can put it this way: We don't know what we don't know. We are like little children peering through a keyhole. *We see a tiny bit, but the rest is hidden from our view.* Only later will we begin to piece together God's fingerprints on the circumstances of life.

Today, perhaps, for you, many things are unclear, uncertain, and undecided. You have more questions than you have answers. So much of life seems like stumbling through the fog of haphazard circumstances. One day God will make all things plain to you, and all his ways will be proved right.

Life is a mysterious journey full of unexpected twists and turns. *The path ahead is a mystery to us all.* No one can say for sure what is around the next bend. It may be a smooth road through a lovely valley, or we may discover the bridge is washed out, and we have to find a way to cross a deep river. Often the road disappears, or it may seem to go in three different directions, and we won't know which one to choose. But there is One who knows the way because the past, present, and future are all the same to him, and the darkness is as the light of day. He knows the way we should go.

God is sovereign. The fact that you're here this morning, attending a Fil-Am Church service and not at another church is not an accident. Even if you feel like you just dragged yourself here or somebody else did, it's not an accident. Yes, you had the choice of coming here but God is working behind the scene. God is doing something in your life. He let you listen to this message because he knows you need to hear this message.

Some of you are going through a difficulty. You're wearing a smile but deep inside your heart is aching. You want to know why things are going the way they do in your life. Today, you learned that God is sovereign.

He is in total control of the universe and certainly he is in total control of your life. All you need to do is to submit to his will. You can say, “Not my will, Lord, but yours be done.”

If you're a Christian, you submit to his will of making you like Jesus. That's one of the reasons why you're going through what you're going through right now. If you're not a Christian, you need to submit to the Lordship of Jesus. You need to admit that you need a Savior because you've been out of God's will by doing things that God is not pleased with. The Bible calls these things sin. Anything that you think, say, or do that is not God's will is sin. So, in order for God to change your life, first you need to admit that you're a sinner. Then, ask forgiveness for your sins. Then, let God know that you're turning away from your sins and then, acknowledge that Jesus died for you on the cross to forgive your sins. Then, believe that he was buried and he rose from the dead to give you eternal life. God loves you. He wants to reveal to you his purpose and plan for your life. The Bible says, “God so loved the world (and that includes you) that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life.”

Will you give your life to Jesus today?