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# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## **God's Providence: Our Hope and Assurance**

SERMON BY REV. STEVEN GRANT ■ SEPT 3, 2017

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The Scripture for this morning is from the Gospel of Matthew 16:21-28. This passage follows Peter's famous confession of faith where he declares that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. <sup>22</sup> And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." <sup>23</sup> But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

<sup>24</sup> Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup> For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. <sup>26</sup> For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? <sup>27</sup> For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. <sup>28</sup> Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

It is not always easy to understand the ways of God's Providence. What is Providence? We could say very simply that

Providence is God working out His purpose through the affairs of His creation: God at work among us. Sometimes God gives us a glimpse and some insight into what He is up to, but often-times He does not. Sometimes, when He gives us that glimpse, He does so after the fact—we can look back and see cause-and-effect. Though we may not understand what He is doing or what His purpose is, the Bible reveals that God is Sovereign over all things come what may. We can trust Him in all circumstances of life.

As I said, sometimes He gives us a glimpse. Do you remember the Battle of Brandywine from your American history? Brandywine is a creek outside Philadelphia where George Washington and his army set up their defenses to prevent the British from invading and capturing Philadelphia. They were not able to stop the British, but the fact that Washington was able to keep his army intact was really the victory of that battle for the Americans.

There was another person at that battle, a British officer named Col. Ferguson. Col. Ferguson had invented a breech-loading rifle which enabled soldiers to reload their rifles quickly from the back rather than through the muzzle. The British had these weapons, but the Americans did not. At one point during the battle, Col. Ferguson had an opposing officer in his cross-hairs. At this time, there was still a gentleman's agreement that officers would not kill opposing officers, but that is not the reason why Col. Ferguson did not pull the trigger. He testified afterward that he saw this brave officer out in front, leading his men, and he was so impressed by the officer's bravery that, even though he had a clear shot, out of admiration he chose not to fire. That officer was George Washington.

Now, imagine how the Revolution would have been different

if Col. Ferguson had simply moved his finger! Although Washington's army had lost the battle, he still managed to keep the army intact; an incredible act of leadership. It is very possible that had that not happened, had Col. Ferguson fired that shot, the war would have ended right there. If the Revolution had failed, the history of America would have been radically different and if there been no America, the history of the world would have been radically different; it all could have changed as a result of the movement of one finger! Why did he not shoot?

Some would say that it was luck or that it was a coincidence or some vague karma. But the Bible says that God is Sovereign over all things and governs the affairs of men for His purpose. One might say that it is great when good things happen and we can see cause-and-effect. We might say it was Providential that Col. Ferguson did not pull the trigger and we might be more inclined to embrace God's Providence when the results are good. It is harder when bad things happen. That is when God's Providence becomes a bit more difficult to understand. Oftentimes I hear people try to get God off the hook by trying to make sure that we do not blame Him for things by saying, "Well you know, God really wasn't responsible for that; that's not what He meant to have happen."

I want to assure you that God really does not need for us to get Him off the hook! He can take care of Himself. It brings me no comfort to get God off the hook and to suggest that there are things that exist outside of His Sovereignty. Do not tell me that I am at the mercy of chance or of a world gone mad with things totally out of control. That does not bring me comfort.

You might ask me, "Are you suggesting that God causes these bad things to happen?" I am not necessarily saying that,

but it certainly is true that He allowed it. If you say that God does not have the power to prevent certain things from happening, and if that is what you believe, what kind of God is that? You cannot get around it. If you say that God is Sovereign over all things, and if you say He has the power and He chooses not to use that power, you cannot get away from the fact that God made a choice. Now what are we going to do with that? His will is still involved; all is still under His Sovereignty. How do we come to terms with this?

Let's begin with Job, shall we? In Job 2:9-10, Job is having all kinds of trouble and he has lost everything. *"Then his wife said to him, 'Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die.'"* This is what happens when we give up on God; it leads to despair, and we perish. It is exactly what happens when we run away from God in the midst of trouble; it leads to bitterness, despair, and destruction. But when we run to Him, even with our questions and our deepest concerns and needs, we find healing.

What does Job say? *"But he said to her, 'You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?'"* What Job is trying to tap into is God's Providence.

Do you know of Corrie Ten Boom the Evangelist? She tells the story of her sister Betsy, who had incredible faith. Betsy was always thanking God for everything. If she were here today, she would thank God for the rain and for the floods. Corrie accepted it as an exuberant expression of faith from Betsy. As you may know, during World War II all of Corrie Ten Boom's family was arrested for rescuing and hiding Jews and were sent to Ravensbrück concentration camp. The barracks where Corey and Betsy were confined was infested with fleas

and Betsy, true to form, thanked God for the fleas! Corey thought this was over-the-top! She did not want to thank God for fleas!

Corey and Betsy were using some smuggled pages of Scripture to lead worship and Bible studies in the barracks, and many of the women in that barracks were comforted and strengthened in this their worst nightmare; many of them came to faith thanks to Corey and Betsy. They could not figure out how it was that they were never caught in their worship, especially since they often sang hymns. Then one fine day, a big-shot German officer came to inspect the compound. As his group was approaching that barracks and about ready to enter, one of the guards said, “You do not want to go in there. We never go in there because that place is infested with fleas!” Betsy just smiled. God brings things together in ways that we do not understand.

There is a story in American history about Squanto. Squanto was an Indian in what later became the state of Massachusetts. The pilgrims left England headed for Virginia where the weather was supposed to be good, but because of the storms that they endured on their ocean crossing, they were pushed farther and farther north until they landed on what seemed to be a godforsaken place with terrible weather—what is now Cape Cod. It was just awful! It just happened, however, that they landed within a mile of the one Indian on the entire continent who spoke English! Several years prior, Squanto and several other Indians had been kidnapped by an awful man named Hunt who had taken them to Spain; they finally ended up in England which was where Squanto learned English. Somehow he had made it back to his home country and was just in time to meet the pilgrims. Because he could speak

English, he taught the pilgrims how to survive and to grow and find food. He helped them communicate with the other Indians so they were able to survive. There is nothing good about kidnapping; there is nothing good about being sent off course and into storms at the sea; yet, imagine how history would have been different were it not for Squanto and God's provision for His people.

In Romans 8, Paul writes that we know God works all things for good. He is not saying that **all** things are good, but that God works all things **for** good. He is talking about God's Providence. Though God may not be the cause of certain things, I still believe that the Bible puts all things under His Providence. It does not tie everything up into neat little boxes, but it provides a much softer place to land. It is more comforting to think of it in this way—there are limits to human perception. God has given us great minds. More than anything else in creation we have a great capacity to think, to reason, to invent things, and to be creative; but we are still limited.

Consider for a moment a little child, a toddler. All that child knows is what is right in front of his face; he has a very limited worldview. He has no idea that across the hall there is a nice room with cookies. We might represent that very limited worldview by a small half circle. As the child gets a little older, he can remember that the big room across the hall has cookies, but he has no idea that 20 miles up the road is a city called Fort Myers. As the child grows, his worldview keeps expanding and of course, by the time he is a teenager he thinks he knows everything! We know that is not true, so he is still under the jurisdiction of adults. Hopefully, by the time the child becomes an adult, he has a much wider worldview and his half circle has grown. But this church is not big enough, in fact all creation is not big enough, to be able to draw the half circle that

could represent the full worldview of Almighty God. He sees a much bigger picture than we ever could.

What happens? Think again about that little toddler when he asks his mother for a cookie and his mother says, “No.” The child does not understand why he cannot have a cookie, but his mother knows that in about half an hour they will have dinner and if the child eats a cookie now he will not eat his vegetables. The child may think that his mother is being mean because he does not understand.

We adults do the same thing. We pray and we ask for things, but nothing happens. We pray for very profound things, but life does not go the way we think it is supposed to go. We react in the same way as the toddler: We think that God is either being mean or God is not there. We lament, and our faith can be shaken; we despair; we do not know what to do. These are understandable emotions, however, we do not account for our limited perception.

Remember a month or two ago when Pastor Pratt, in his sermon, referenced the logo of Harvard University? The logo depicts three books on which is written the word “*Veritas*” or truth. That is not the original version of the logo. It originally also said “*Ecclesiae Et Christo*” meaning “truth for the church and for Christ.” This was to indicate that Christ was the source of truth for the church and for the world. Originally, two of the three books were face up and one was face down. The three books were to represent that we have minds with the ability to perceive things and to grow, to understand and inquire, but there are limits to our abilities so the third book is face down indicating that we need *revelation*.

As time went on in the Enlightenment, the whole idea arose that we human beings can perfect ourselves if we just become

more educated. Because we trust human reason and human ability and creativity to perfect ourselves, *ecclesiae* disappeared, the church disappeared, Christ disappeared, and all three books were turned face up because we supposedly no longer needed revelation. The Enlightenment that dominated Western culture for hundreds of years was literally blown out of the water by the French Revolution and Napoleon, the Civil War in America, and certainly by World Wars I and II. The devastation and the horrific results perpetrated by the human ingenuity of one of the most cultured and educated countries in the world, Germany, left the world in disillusionment and confusion. You would think at that point, we would finally get the point that it is not about us; we must turn to Almighty God for His revelations and His guidance. But, no; we replaced it with “secular humanism” which still purports that the human mind is the highest level for figuring out truth and what is right or wrong.

My friends, we need revelation because there are limits to human perception, and when human perception reaches its limit, we must embrace revelation from Almighty God. That is exactly what is happening in this Scripture passage. Think about what was going on between Peter and Jesus. Peter has just given his famous declaration of faith in Matthew 16:16-18, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*” Jesus says to Peter, “*...flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.*” It was a revelation. Jesus said, “*You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.*”

Starting in Matthew 16:21, Jesus tried to give the disciples further revelation by trying to explain to them what it means to be the Christ: “*...that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*” When Peter heard that Jesus was to

be killed, he “...took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.’” Peter’s reaction is understandable. Peter loved this Man; he had pinned all his hopes on this Man; he did not want Jesus to be killed. What else would he say?

What is Jesus’ response? In verse 23:

*...he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”*

By saying “Get behind me” Jesus was saying, “You are supposed to follow Me! I am not going to follow you!” Why does He use the word “Satan” which in Hebrew means “adversary,” or “being an adversary to me”? Whereas a moment ago, Peter was the rock on which He was to build His church, now Peter has become a rock upon which to stumble because he was not setting his mind on the things of God. He was not thinking the way God thinks, he was thinking the way a human being would think—not that it is all bad—but imagine if Peter had gotten his way. Where would we all be?

In Isaiah 55:8 the prophet says, “*My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.*” Often times we seem to think we can figure out what God is doing or what God is thinking. This teaches us that whenever we come up against the limitations of human perception, when God’s Word seems to contradict our way of thinking, what we must do is follow rather than try to lead. Who is Sovereign here anyway? Ultimately we want to say He is, but sometimes, in the way we live, it is as if we think we are. We are to conform to Him, He does not conform to us! In Micah 4:2, the prophet said, “*...he may teach us his ways...that we may walk in his paths.*”

Once again, imagine if Peter had gotten his way. This is

why Jesus says that if we want to follow Him and be a disciple, we must be willing to deny ourselves, which is hard. In verses 24-26, look what He says,

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup>For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. <sup>26</sup>For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?

In John 14:6 Christ says, *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”* We are constantly acting like Peter and being the adversary. We are getting in His way because we want to go one way and Jesus wants us to go another way; often times we do not fully understand why it is we have to go a certain way because it seems to be so much harder.

It is because we do not embrace Providence. We do not recognize that God is Sovereign and is always at work in the world achieving His purpose, but that purpose is so much bigger than we can often grasp. His way, as difficult as it might be, is always the best way because ultimately the victory is His. We know from the Book of Revelation that when Jesus returns He will put all things right and establish His kingdom forever. In Matthew 16:27-28, look what He says,

For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. <sup>28</sup>Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.

In the very next passage of Scripture, Christ takes the disciples to Mount Tabor where He is transfigured. Peter, James

and John saw Jesus in his glory. Later they had the horrible experience of seeing the One in whom they had put all their trust being crucified in a humiliating and very painful way, yet this led to the salvation of all who would be claimed by Him. What if He had not done this thing?

We have to shift our thinking. In Isaiah 40:28, look what the prophet said to Israel when they going to great travail.

Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and His understanding no one can fathom.

Of course, He knows what He is doing! He created all that there is! He is Sovereign over it! He does not grow tired; He is not weary; it is not like He is not paying attention or that He is asleep or on a trip or something. No one can fathom His understanding. How is it that we can know the mind of God? In Psalm 147:5, look what the psalmist says, *“Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; His understanding is beyond measure.”* Any time you are in the depths, repeat that Psalm!

Friends, I do not know why God does what He does in a given situation. I do not know why He allows certain things to happen when He does, nor do I know exactly what He is going to do. What I do know is this: in the midst any situation, although we will experience the full range of emotions—sadness, fear, sorrow, anxiety, and joy—God is still good. He is still Sovereign over all things, and He is working out His purpose in your life and the lives of others. That is why the psalmist says in Psalm 23, *“Ye though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death....”* In one sense, this means human mortality. We do experience human mortality either of a loved one or our own. But, this also encompasses the times in our lives when we feel

that our lives are caving in and terrible things are happening; we feel like we are walking in the “valley of the shadow of death.” This is all part of living in a fallen world, the result of sin. Although we live in a fallen world and at times we walk in those valleys remember, *“Ye though I walk **through** the valley...”* We are not going to be stuck there! We are going to come out the other side! Why do I know this? What is it the psalmist says? *“I will fear no evil.”* Why? Because, *“Thou art with me!”*

Did you notice the very last sentence that you sang in our hymn, “I Sing the Almighty Power of God”? *“...everywhere that I may be, You, God, are present there.”* I know that God is worthy of my trust. I know that He is worthy of my devotion. I know that He is worthy of my worship. He is worthy of my life. God's Providence, His unsearchable Providence, is the source of all our hope and assurance. Do you trust it? Do you trust His Providence?

George Washington considered himself the apostle of Providence. Yes, he believed in Providence because he saw it over and over again. In our own lives, in tiny ways and in huge ways, God's Providence is at work by the hand of a great, almighty, good and gracious God. To Him be the glory!

