

When life turns topsy-turvy # 4: Trust our surprising God

Message for Sunday, May 17, 2020
by Bruce Fraser

1) God is full of surprises

Ralph Neves was one of the best jockeys in the horse racing business. When he retired in 1963, he was one of a few jockeys who had more than 3,000 wins. But his most famous race was the one he never finished.

In 1936, Neves was riding a horse named Flanakins in a race at Bay Meadows in California. Coming into the final stretch and a sure winner, the horse tripped and threw Ralph headfirst into the rail. His horse landed on top of him, crushing him; plus other horses stepped on him as they sped by. The track doctor rushed to his side, but he was too late. He could find no pulse; Ralph was declared dead. The ambulance came anyway and rushed Ralph Neves to the hospital. After several attempts to revive him, he was pronounced dead and covered with a sheet.

The people at the racetrack were in shock. Neves' wife had been called to meet with the president of the racetrack. The jockeys were taking a collection for the widow. Then Ralph Neves came walking into the clubhouse. The jockeys screamed, his wife fainted, and Ralph told his story. He said, "I knew I didn't feel dead, even if I was sore all over." He spoke out to the doctor through the drape sheet, so they rushed him on a gurney into a room. Ralph thought that was a waste, so wearing just his pants, he got in a taxi and rode back to the track. He wasn't allowed to ride that day, but got enough second place finishes the next day that he was declared the winner of the meet.

The *San Francisco Examiner* published this headline in their newspaper the next day: "Neves, Called Dead in Fall, Denies It."

Ah, life is full of surprises! And God is the biggest surprise of all. That's because we will never, *never* understand God.

Isaiah 55:8–9, New International Version:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord.

"As the heavens are higher than the earth,

so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Human history is full of stories of God surprising people.

- Abraham doubted and Sarah laughed at the idea of them having a child at their age;
- Moses stopped to look at a bush that was on fire, and his whole life was turned upside down;
- When Joseph was sold by his own brothers to be a slave, would he ever dreamed that this would lead to him one day being the Prime Minister of Egypt?

2) The Greatest Surprise of all

Jesus is God's greatest surprise. Who would ever have imagined that the almighty eternal God would do such a thing?

John 1:14, New International Version:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

God became vulnerable, even weak and helpless. Instead of being the one in charge and the judge, he was the one who was judged.

His entire life on earth was one surprise after another: from the angel telling Mary that she would give birth to the Son of God, to the shepherds and wise men visiting, to the miracles of healing, calming a storm, bringing the dead back to life.

Of course, from our vantage point it's not so surprising, because we've heard the story so many times. But try to imagine what it was like for the people around Jesus—both his friends and his enemies. Trying to guess what he would do next would be like trying to catch a fly in mid air with your bare hand.

Yes, Jesus is God's greatest surprise, and the resurrection is the greatest of the greatest surprises.

For a while after Jesus was killed, it seemed that evil had overcome good. It looked like the power of sin, death, and destruction had prevailed. For his followers, it was the end of their world. Their hopes and dreams were dashed.

This is the surprise that happened to the women who went to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body:

Luke 24:2–6, New American Standard Bible:

And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men suddenly stood near them in dazzling clothing; and as the women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, “Why do you seek the living One among the dead? “He is not here, but He has risen.”

This is how the men reacted when the women came running back with the news:

Luke 24:11, New International Version:

But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.

They weren’t just surprised: they were stunned. It took a while before they could believe it. Maybe they were afraid to get their hopes up again.

Yet on resurrection Sunday, all of history changed. God *is* still in charge. Evil may have its day, but it will never win in the end. Paul sums it up succinctly:

Romans 8:38–39, New International Version:

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

3) Lean your whole weight on the God of surprises

Let’s take this truth and apply it to our lives. We all face troubles and suffering in our lives from time to time. Some more than others. Some a *lot* more. But the truth is that death and evil will *not* win; God is in charge, and we can trust him.

Think of the times you have lost sleep because of worry or fear. You can feel the anxiety churning in your stomach. What does the greatest surprise say to you in this situation?

John 16:33, New International Version:

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

Jesus does not tell us to live in a make-believe world, to pretend that our troubles are only trifles. Was the cross just a trifle? He understands; he’s been there.

Jesus says to us in the midst of the storms of life, “Here, take my hand. Have courage. I will walk with you through this. We’ll do it together. Trust me.”

When missionary John Paton went to live in a remote corner of Africa, he taught the native villagers the Christian faith. John Paton was the first person to teach the villagers about Jesus Christ. As his work progressed, he baptized some new converts and started a church. Then he began the difficult, exhausting task of translating the Bible into their own language. With the Bible translated into their own language the people could read and study the Bible. As John Paton carefully and painstakingly translated the Bible, he realized that they had no word in their language for the word “believe.” This presented quite a problem. “Believe” is an important word in our Bibles, appearing more than 200 times in the New Testament alone. Paton was stuck. How could he translate the Bible for the people without the word “believe?”

One day, as he was grappling with this dilemma, one of the villagers came in for a visit. The native villager was exhausted from a hard day’s work in the hot sun. He sat down and leaned back in the chair. In his native language the villager said how wonderful it is when you are tired to “lean your whole weight on something.” It was as if lightning had struck. That was the image Paton was searching for. “Lean your whole weight on something” was what it meant to believe. Now he could continue his work translating the Bible.¹

¹ Quoted by James Moore, *When All Else Fails Read the Instructions*.

Can you do that? *Will* you do that? Will you trust in the God of surprises? Will you lean your whole weight on him?

Let me tell you another story, about a little boy. His mother died when he was an infant. His father, trying hard to be both father and mother, was doing his best. He planned a picnic. The little boy had never been on a picnic. So they made their plans, fixed the lunch, packed the car, and then it was time to go to bed before the picnic the next day.

But the boy couldn't sleep. He tossed and he turned; the excitement was too much for him. Finally he got out of bed and ran into the room where his father had already fallen asleep. He shook his father, and woke him up. His father looked around, saw his son and said, "What are you doing up? What's the matter?"

The son said, "I can't sleep!"

The father said, "What's the problem? Why can't you sleep?"

The boy said, "Daddy, I'm excited about tomorrow!"

The father said, "Well, son, I'm sure you are. And it's going to be great day tomorrow; but it won't be a great day if we don't get some sleep, so why don't you just run down the hall, get back in bed and get a good night's rest."

So the boy trudged down the hall to his room and got in bed. Before long, sleep came... to the father. It wasn't long after, the little boy was back beside his father's bed. He was pushing and shaking his father. His father opened his eyes and with surprise saw his son again. Harsh words almost blurted out, until he saw the expression on his son's face. He said, "Son, what's the matter now?"

The boy said, "Daddy, I just want to thank you for tomorrow."

That's the kind of faith I like to have in God. Even though I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow—or even the rest of today—I'm trusting God through it all.

Next Steps:

- Pray: "Lord, I am trusting you. I don't know what's going to happen this week or even the rest of this year. No one does. But I'm putting my trust in you, that will be my strength and my solid foundation through it all."
- Give thanks for God's many blessings.
- Share the good news with someone else.