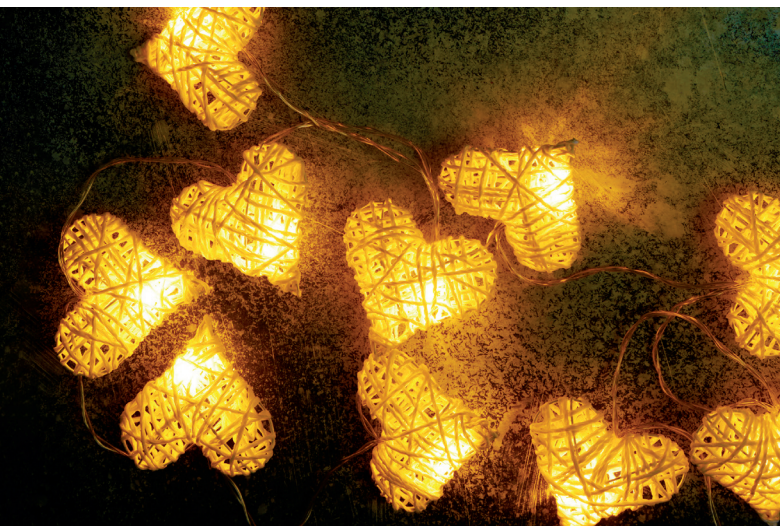


SURPRISED BY GRACE

HOW JESUS DEFIES OUR
EXPECTATIONS



Bill Crowder



introduction

Surprised by Grace

How Jesus Defies Our Expectations

Surprises can be interesting. Sometimes they are wonderful and thrilling—like the person who works hard at his job with no expectation of reward or recognition but is surprised with a coveted promotion. It's a time of joyful shock, and the ear-to-ear grin stays plastered to his face for days and days. What a great surprise!

There are other times, however, when surprises can be heartbreaking, even terrifying—like the person who goes in for her routine health checkup feeling great, only to be told, “We’ve found something.”

Surprises, good and bad, have the potential to knock us back a little. They challenge our comfortable presuppositions about life.

When Jesus revealed God to us, it had, and still can have, that same kind of unsettling effect. He stretched the limits of understanding God for the people of his day, or our day. Jesus takes us to the edge of the universe and allows us a clearer glimpse of the Father than we have ever had before. What we see there is likely to be far more wonderful and vastly different than what we probably expect.

The surprising side of God challenges us to rethink our spiritual and biblical paradigms. Jesus helps us consider a view of God that is likely to be quite different than what we would have imagined.

Jesus revealed God in such unexpected ways that we simply do not have adequate labels by which to categorize the heart of the Father that Jesus revealed.

So, what did Jesus tell us about God that is surprising? Admittedly, we can only begin to tell the story. But in the pages that follow, we will see a few of the ways that God's revelation of himself in Christ is more wonderful—and surprising—than anyone could have expected.

Bill Crowder

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one

Majesty Embracing Commonness

The first time I went to Israel, I found myself in awe. I was overwhelmed when I first saw the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus spent so much of His earthly life and ministry. Stunned by the breathtaking view of the Old City of Jerusalem from atop the Mount of Olives. Intrigued by the history and the heartache of the mountain fortress of Masada. Heartbroken by the sense of horror and grief I felt as we spent time at the Holocaust memorial at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

With all that wonder, however, it was surprising how underwhelmed I was by two of the best-known places in the Bible lands—Bethlehem and Nazareth. They were ordinary. They were unimpressive, dirty cities, far from the quaint “little town of Bethlehem” I had envisioned each year at Christmas. I was unprepared for the commonness that I saw in those historic sites.

Despite my personal disappointment, that ordinariness is precisely what makes them so significant. They are something of a metaphor for Jesus whose mysterious and inexpressible incarnation gave significance to those sleepy, ancient villages.

It was appropriate that Jesus’s earthly life would be connected to such ordinary places. Despite the true glory of his identity, he was (and is) often seen as too familiar and ordinary.

The prophet Isaiah warned of this:

He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. (ISAIAH 53:2)

That’s an unexpected description for the Savior of the world. That there was nothing desirable in his appearance speaks to the way that the Messiah and Son of God would present himself—common.

As a boy, I remember my dad taking me to see the movie *King of Kings*. Jesus was played by Jeffrey Hunter, who was a very handsome man. In his portrayal of Christ, Hunter had long, flowing,

auburn hair and piercing blue eyes—which made a compelling impression.

But Jesus didn't come with movie-star good looks. In fact, the immediate implication of Isaiah's words is just the opposite. He was an average, ordinary, run-of-the-mill first-century Jew with dark hair, dark eyes, and olive skin. Isaiah was preparing the people for Messiah to come as he did, but they didn't grasp the significance of his words.

The commonness with which Jesus intentionally presented himself extended to the commonness of where he lived—Nazareth. Bible teacher Adam Clarke wrote:

We may suppose that Nazareth, at this time, [had] become so abandoned that no good could be expected from any of those who dwelt in it, and that its wickedness had passed into a proverb: “Can anything good be found in Nazareth?”

This thinking certainly would explain Nathanael's reaction to Philip's statement about finding someone special from Nazareth:

Philip found Nathanael and told him, “We have



He was an average, ordinary, run-of-the-mill first-century Jew with dark hair, dark eyes, and olive skin.

found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathanael asked. “Come and see,” said Philip. (JOHN 1:45–46)

There was more than a little stigma connected to being from Nazareth in the Galilee. Galileans were regarded as being backward and ignorant, especially by the religious aristocracy in Jerusalem. So someone from Galilee would not be considered a worthy candidate for the role of Messiah. Notice:

On hearing his words, some of the people said, “Surely this man is the Prophet.”

Others said, “He is the Messiah.” Still others asked, “How can the Messiah come from Galilee? Does not Scripture say that the Messiah will come from David’s descendants and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?” (JOHN 7:40–42)

Their final analysis of Jesus’s heritage is recorded in John 7:52 when the religious leaders said to Nicodemus: “Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of *Galilee*” (emphasis added).¹

➤ *Their conclusions were based on flawed thinking. In fact, there had already been a prophet from **Galilee**, Jonah was from the village of Gath Hepher (2 KINGS 14:25), only 2 miles from Nazareth. Yet, in their inability to process a Christ of commonness, they dismissed the truth of who Jesus really was—and missed his true identity.*

The reality of the incarnation teaches us that what people saw in the outward appearance of Jesus was not the whole story. The rest of the story is alluded to in Matthew 17.

Jesus had gone up on a mountain in the Galilee with three of his disciples (Peter, James, John). Matthew's record of their moments on the mountain is stunning in its description of the true nature of the Jesus who was thought to be so common.

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. (MATTHEW 17:1–6)

The true nature of Christ was endorsed by the remarkable appearance of Moses and Elijah. But even more important, that nature was revealed in the display of his glory ("transfigured") and the

declaration of the Father (“My Son”). The majesty of Christ was put on full display on that mountain.

Despite his common appearance, common upbringing, common lifestyle, and common background, there was absolutely nothing ordinary about Jesus. His majesty was undiminished by the ordinary way he revealed himself.



two

Greatness Embracing Insignificance

once heard a story about Dr. Harry Ironside when he was the pastor of Moody Memorial Church in Chicago. A family had been heavily influenced by Dr. Ironside's teaching. As a result, they saved their money for months to take their children on a special trip to Chicago to hear this well-known preacher in the Moody pulpit.

When they finally visited the church, the parents were thrilled with the worship experience and were excited to have heard Pastor Ironside's teaching in person. As they left the service, they thought their children would also have been overjoyed with the experience, so they asked them to share their

thoughts. After some reflection, one of the children said, “I’ve always heard how great Pastor Ironside was supposed to be. But he wasn’t that great. I understood everything he said.”

In a way, that’s how it was with Jesus. The religious leaders of his day weren’t inclined, or even able, to relate well with those they saw as insignificant people. Jesus, however, displayed how true greatness naturally and effortlessly bridges gaps between people.

In first-century Israel, few things were more insignificant than children. Yet Jesus loved children, and they were comfortable with him. Jesus even used a child as an illustration of true greatness:

Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him. Then he said to them, “Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest.” (LUKE 9:47–48)

Even today we are conditioned to think that children should be “seen and not heard.” It’s easy to have the same sentiment W. C. Fields had when he said, “Go away, kid. You bother me.” But children were not insignificant to Jesus.

From the smallest sparrow (MATTHEW 10:29) to the lilies of the field that are here today and gone tomorrow (6:28–30), Jesus consistently placed the value of greatness on the things the world viewed as insignificant.

✎ Unlike the rugged individualism in the Western world, ancient **Israel's view of children** had everything to do with the future hope of family. Until they reached maturity and could either marry or be married off, children had no standing in society. They followed the directions of their elders—either in their immediate household or in their town, tribe, or nation—without say in the matter. But those very same children were the key to each family's (and sometimes whole towns' and tribes') hope. The legacy of a family or tribe was built on the children. So while they held no authority in society, they were the key to every society's future. That's why the genealogies in Genesis are labeled with the father's name, but explained with the actions of the children.

Ironically, as Jesus embraced insignificance, he openly exposed the relative insignificance of those who sought to present themselves as great. In Matthew 20:25–26, Jesus addressed that issue head-on:

Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant.”

Jesus brought a heavenly perspective to our earthly paradigms by reminding us of the danger of being consumed by great riches when he dealt with the rich young ruler (MARK 10:22). He warned against measuring greatness by achievements that cannot last when he exposed the temporal nature of the temple (13:1–2). He

even warned against the tendency of self-important people to flaunt their religion as if it were the emblem and badge of their greatness (MATTHEW 6:1–5).

Jesus surprised the people of his day by redefining the terms and standards of what was truly great and what was surprisingly insignificant. And because he himself was (and is) truly great, his willingness to give value to that which the world saw as unimportant was unsettling. He made the people of his day uncomfortable by consistently disdaining the “great” in order to embrace the “insignificant.” It forces his followers to examine their own ways of thinking and ask, “Am I valuing those whom Jesus valued, or do I allow significance to be defined by those around me?”



three

Wholeness Embracing Brokenness

Traveling the road in Jakarta, Indonesia the scenes on the roadside can range from mildly amusing to deeply disturbing.

It's mildly amusing to watch men selling American-made home-improvement magazines to drivers who were stopped in traffic on the highway. But the abject poverty of some families, individuals, and children is deeply disturbing. Obviously without adequate housing, clothing, food, water, or

sanitation, the people in these situations are utterly destitute and broken.

It's difficult not to turn away from seeing that kind of poverty. They are scenes that often create responses in us that move from guilt to anger to disregard to apathy. In most cases, we simply divert our eyes and do nothing. We see the brokenness of life in this world and find it too much to process. But Jesus was different. He embraced this world's brokenness and invested himself in it. In fact, he transformed the brokenness of life into something radically different.

Few things were more perplexing to the people of Jesus's generation than his willingness to invest himself in the castoffs and the rejects of society. Jesus showed deep compassion and concern to the broken people that most others turned away from. Perhaps nowhere is this seen more clearly than in his interaction with one particular leper.

Remember that in Jesus's day leprosy was an ugly, destructive disease that was feared as highly contagious. When a person developed a dry patch of skin, he would be examined by the priests, then isolated for a period of time. If a second examination proved that the spot was indeed leprous, the sufferer would be driven from his family, home, career, community, and synagogue to wander outside the realm of society. They would often live in exile communities with other stricken sufferers, and never allowed to reengage

in life as known before contracting leprosy. If such an individual found themselves among “normal” people, they would have to cover their mouth and cry out: “Unclean! Unclean!” They had to tell people to stay away. Imagine the emotional isolation that would create, already isolated, telling people to stay away.

Lepers were the standard outcasts of their day—a clear, if not disturbing, picture of the brokenness of fallen people in a fallen world. They lived a life of isolation, sorrow, shame, and anguish.

All of this provides the background for Jesus’s extraordinary encounter with one leper. Matthew described the scene:

A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.”

Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” Immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy. Then Jesus said to him, “See that you don’t tell anyone. But go, show yourself



Jesus violated every social and religious prohibition of the day as he healed the leper by touching him, the one thing that absolutely wasn’t done for a leper.

to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.” (MATTHEW 8:2–4)

Two things stand out: First, the boldness of the leper. I can almost imagine him charging toward Jesus, while the crowds parted like the Red Sea as this obviously afflicted man moved through them. His confident trust in Christ’s ability to heal him was a powerful motivator as he came to the Savior.

The second thing is the compassion of Christ—even though the word *compassion* is not used in the text. Jesus could have healed this man a dozen different ways. He could have healed him with a thought or a word or a gesture or a nod of his head or by asking him to cover himself with mud from the banks of the Jordan River and then wash in another place. But he didn’t. Jesus violated every social and religious prohibition of the day as he healed the leper by touching him, the one thing that absolutely wasn’t done for a leper.

For a person who hadn’t felt human touch in years, the compassionate touch of Jesus would have contributed just as much to the healing of this leprous man’s lonely heart as it did to the healing of his diseased body. It’s powerful to see the degree to which Jesus was willing to go in order to impact this one deeply broken life.

But why? Why would Jesus go to such lengths to engage a broken world? Perhaps we can find



Jesus impacts broken lives because he is willing to inject his divine wholeness into our brokenness. Instead of God calling us to make ourselves better, he came to our brokenness.

a hint of the answer in the New Testament letter to the Hebrews. There we read:

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (HEBREWS 4:15–16)

Jesus experienced life at its most challenging levels. And he did this, in part, so that when we are broken by our own struggles and turn to him for help, part of the comfort we receive is in knowing that he understands. He understands because

he willingly inserted himself into human life—engaging, experiencing, and embracing broken people at the point of their need.

Jesus impacts broken lives because he is willing

to inject his divine wholeness into our brokenness. Instead of God calling us to make ourselves better, he came to our brokenness.



four

Sufficiency Embracing Inadequacy

The bumper sticker reads, “When you get to the end of your rope, tie a knot and hang on.” It sounds like very clever advice—until even the beam your rope is tied to comes crashing down.

Sometimes life becomes overwhelming. We can’t stand up to the heartache and pain of tragic circumstances in our families without being affected. It brings us to a renewed understanding of our inability to process life in a fallen world.

Yet, unless we are at the brink of disaster, we often tend to live in a way that reeks of independence

and self-reliance. We pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps and press on, convinced that by the strength of our own will we can do whatever we set our minds to.

This is deep and tragic self-deception. We can sing, “I did it my way,” but the fact remains that we place ourselves in great jeopardy when we rely on our own adequacy.

In writing to a self-satisfied congregation in the city of Corinth, the apostle Paul warned:

So if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! (1 CORINTHIANS 10:12)

The apostle understood that we simply do not have the adequacy we claim when facing the serious issues of life. No amount of defiance can compensate for the lack of wisdom, strength, and justice needed to navigate the pain of this world.

Perhaps this is why so many former professional athletes struggle with the adjustment to life after sports. On the playing field, everything is under control. Everything makes sense. Everything is manageable. But in retirement, life shifts to a different arena—one where their athletic prowess is less valuable.

When athletes live most of their lives in an “artificial” world where their skills are designed to manage a specific kind of controlled life, they can develop a kind of confidence that is, in fact, an illusion. Once they retire, the things that gave their lives equilibrium get tossed aside like a rag doll in a tornado.

Such athletes are symbolic of all of us. We simply are not equipped to manage life in our own strength and wisdom.

Christ responded dramatically to the unfortunate self-sufficiency displayed by the people he created.

In Jesus's day, this bent toward self-sufficiency was embodied in the religious establishment—and the religious establishment was equated with the city of Jerusalem. Luke describes a time when Jesus looked out over the city:

As [Jesus] approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. (LUKE 19:41–42)

Why did he weep? Perhaps part of the reason for his grief over the city is seen in the days following his entry. As Jesus taught in the temple, he accused the religious leaders of Israel of pride and arrogance—in essence, religious self-sufficiency. It was a failing that would not only destroy them but all who looked to them for spiritual direction.

In the end, however, it was heartache, not anger, that fueled Jesus's words to them:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. (MATTHEW 23:37)

Those closing words reveal that there was something deep within the people that split the chasm between themselves and Jesus: “You were not willing!” Here was the all-sufficient Christ, the holy God himself, lamenting the self-sufficiency of fallen human beings and its drastic consequences. That brokenness traces lines down his face at the gates of Jerusalem—the tears of a God whose heart was broken.

The people were not prepared to encounter this kind of God. Even today, with these stories of Christ part of our picture of God, the idea of a broken-hearted God is difficult to really understand.

The Lord Jesus Christ—Son of God and Creator of the universe—experienced deep brokenness as he grieved over the stubborn self-reliance that caused, and still causes, men and women who are the objects of his love to reject him. It’s a powerful contrast.



five

Purity Embracing Sinfulness

As a student in Bible college, our pastor often said, “A good apple doesn’t make a bad apple good. It’s always the other way around.” He was talking about the power of influence, particularly when it’s a corrupting influence. In most of our relationships, he was right. Clean doesn’t cleanse the dirty, corruption infects all that it touches.

In Christ, however, we see the reverse. Jesus wasn’t tainted by his association with people who were considered spiritual “bad apples.” On the contrary,

his mission was to redeem them by purifying the corruption that characterizes human fallenness.

This, frankly, was something the religious leaders struggled to understand. They worked long and hard to maintain the appearance of personal and ceremonial purity, and a significant part of that effort was in maintaining a healthy distance from any contact with “sinners.”

Jesus, by contrast, seemed to welcome the opportunity to associate with the “impure” people the religious establishment held at arm’s length. Notice:

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew’s house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” On hearing this, Jesus said, . . . “But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” (MATTHEW 9:10–13)

To the religious leaders of Jesus’s day, it was unthinkable that a holy God would freely associate with known sinners. Yet, in reality, it was the absolute righteousness of Christ that made such associations possible. Because of his innate holiness and purity, Jesus was beyond being tainted by the sinfulness of the people he encountered. Instead, he deliberately and deeply touched their lives by pulling them out of their sinfulness and into commitment to a life dedicated to God.

As a result, Jesus's interactions with sinful people were characterized by compassion instead of condemnation. He reached out to them instead of retreating from them.

At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

"No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin." (JOHN 8:2-11)

The religious leaders tried to use this woman to trap Jesus. The woman herself was expendable and unimportant, a tool for a job. They used her

to create a dilemma for Jesus. Would he agree with Moses that adulterers deserve death? If so, he would have to allow for a Jewish execution that would defy the laws of Roman occupation. The religious leaders thought that they had Jesus trapped with any answer he gave.

Jesus exposed their hypocrisy without excusing her sin. His compassion did more than rescue her from the stones of the religious crowd. He tenderly urged her to use this lack of condemnation as an opportunity to accept the better ways of the God who loved her.



six

Finding God in the Cross

In the academy award–winning film *Schindler's List*, viewers are confronted with the horrors and evils of the Holocaust. In the process, the true story of Oskar Schindler, a man who was something of a paradox, is told. He was a war profiteer and Nazi party member, but he rescued 1,100 Jews from the death camps, purchasing their lives at great personal expense.

The key moment in the story comes when Itzhak Stern, Schindler's Jewish accountant, is compiling a list of prisoners for Schindler's rescue. Suddenly Stern realizes that the names on the list—representing people being rescued from the Nazi ovens—had been purchased by Schindler with his profits. Stern's comment? "The list is an absolute good. It is life." This was true because the list represented

a demonstration of extreme love and surprising compassion in the face of extraordinary evil.

Of all the surprising things Christ tells us about God, this may be the greatest. In terms of man's expectations of God and Christ's representation of God, perhaps the greatest contrast of all is seen in Christ on the cross.

Jesus said, "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (LUKE 19:10), and it was ultimately on the cross that this happened. But it happened in a way that brought resolution to the deepest needs of our hearts. The psalmist wrote: "Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other" (PSALM 85:10).

The perfect balance of mercy and truth was resolved on the cross. In divine mercy, the Son of God took our place. By the sacrifice of his life for ours, he rescued us from the truth of who we are and the judgment we deserve.

At Calvary, Jesus paid for our sin and delivered us once and for all from what would otherwise have been the destiny of our:

- commonness,
- insignificance,
- brokenness,
- waywardness,
- inadequacy, and
- sinfulness.

It's on the cross that we truly see "God's glory displayed in the face of Christ" (2 CORINTHIANS 4:6). Perfect love balanced by perfect justice. Perfect truth balanced by perfect grace. It was the ultimate surprise and gift that all of us desperately need.



seven

Where Do I Fit In?

At some point, we are compelled to ask, “What does all this mean to me?” To answer that question requires two considerations. If you do not know Christ personally, having never asked him for forgiveness of your sin, it means that there is an answer. There is hope, because there is a God who gave his Son to show you who he is and how much he loves you. That God offers you the gift of his forgiveness and love—a gift which can be accepted only by faith.

For the child of God, however, the challenge is different. Just as Jesus came to put God on display,

we are called to do so as well. We can't do this in our own energy, but we can by his grace and strength. Paul said:

We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

(2 CORINTHIANS 5:20)



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