

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 9, 2016**

SURPRISED BY GRACE

Romans 9:22-33

Do you like surprises? Some of us do. Others, not so much, though I think more of us like to do the surprising than to be the ones surprised. Personally, I'm not particularly fond of surprises. I prefer the illusion of thinking I'm in control (even though I know it is just an illusion).

Not every surprise, of course, is a happy one. But some surprises can warm our hearts and touch us deeply, as when a member of our armed forces – Army, Navy, Air Force, or Marines – who has been deployed in Afghanistan or somewhere else half a world away, comes home earlier than expected and shows up to surprise his or her family. You've probably seen video clips of this kind of surprise on TV or the internet. Of this kind of surprise I think we would all be thrilled to be on the receiving end.

Here is another example: A customer at a drive-through coffee shop one morning paid not only for her own mocha latte but also for the drink of the person in the car behind her. It put a smile on the face of the owner to tell the next customer that her beverage had already been paid for. The second customer was so touched that someone had bought her drink that she bought coffee for the next customer. This sting of kindnesses, one customer paying for the drink of the next customer, continued for the next two hours and 27 customers. That is a nice kind of surprise, isn't it?

And then, there is the surprise of finding something interesting, rare, or valuable when you least expect it. Used booksellers occasionally come across surprising things tucked between the pages of books they acquire. One online bookseller (AbeBooks.com) reports finding, among other things, a stash of forty \$1,000 bills, a Mickey Mantle rookie baseball card, a marriage certificate from 1879, a baby's tooth, a diamond ring, a World War II U.S. ration book (with stamps remaining), World War II discharge papers, and even a strip of bacon (!).

When it comes down to it, though, is there anything more surprising than the grace of God that comes free of charge to people like us who don't deserve it and never will? Is there anything more mysterious, more incomprehensible, than God's sovereign grace to undeserving sinners? Could you have predicted the outpouring of His saving grace in the person and work of Jesus His Son, or that we would be the unlikely objects of God's grace?

That God would choose Israel to be His covenant people is surprising enough. You know the famous lines: "How odd of God/to choose the Jews." (I thought it was Ogden Nash, but apparently it was William Ewer who wrote these lines.) As Moses reminded His people: "The Lord did not set His affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you ..." (Deuteronomy 7:7-8a). It was because of God's sovereign love, because of His free,

sovereign choice to show favor to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – and through them, to send the Savior of the world. Not because of Israel’s virtue, might, or size.

But then, having chosen the Jews as His covenant people, and having sent His Son into the world to give His life as a sacrifice for our sins, to restore our relationship with God that had been severed by our sin, God surprised us again by extending His grace to Gentiles as well as Jews, including all who will receive it in the blessings of His salvation.

Paul illustrates this surprising turn by quoting the prophet Hosea. Hosea was a prophet in the 8th-century BC, sent by God to declare His message to the northern kingdom of Israel in the years leading up to the conquest of Israel by the Assyrians. Hosea is the first of the “Minor Prophets” in the Old Testament. The writings of Hosea and the other prophets that follow are called the “Minor Prophets” because their books are shorter than those of the “Major Prophets” – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

Hosea’s life experience was unique among the Old Testament prophets. God told Hosea to marry a prostitute named Gomer as a sign of His (God’s) redeeming grace and persistent love for His people, in spite of their repeated unfaithfulness to Him. Gomer proved to be unfaithful to Hosea. After a time, she left Hosea and returned to her former way of life. Hosea, however, refused to give up on her. He continued to love her. He kept on forgiving her and urging her to come back home to him. Eventually, Hosea redeemed her financially and brought her back home. I’m not sure if this means that he paid off her debts, or that she had become a slave and he purchased her freedom. Whichever it is, he took care of her financial situation and brought her back home. All of which is meant to be an object lesson of God’s relationship with and unrelenting love for His wayward people, Israel. (See Hosea 1-3.)

Verses 25 and 26 contain the quotes from Hosea. The Lord says:

I will call them “my people” who are not my people;
And I will call her “my loved one” who is not my loved one.
(Hosea 2:23)

And:

It will happen in the very place where it was said of them,
“You are not my people,”
they will be called “sons (and daughters) of the living God.”
(Hosea 1:10)

To understand this more fully, you need to know that Hosea and Gomer had three children. The first was a son named Jezreel. The second was a daughter to whom God told them to give the name Lo-Ruhamah, which means, “Not loved” (Hosea 1:6). “Not loved”! Can you imagine going through life with a name like that? Not loved! Lo-Ruhamah may as well have had her name written across her forehead. It was God’s way of communicating to the people of Israel that He was withdrawing His love and favor from them because of their stubborn disobedience and unbelief. His judgment was about to be carried out against them.

Then Gomer gave birth to a third child, another son, to whom God told them to give the name Lo-Ammi, which means “Not my people” (1:9). Again, because of their rejection of Him and His sovereign rule over them, God was rejecting Israel as His people. Soon they would suffer the consequences of their unbelief and rebellion against Him, which took place when the Assyrians brought an end to the existence of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC.

“The immediate and literal application” of this prophecy, as John Stott notes, “was to Israel in the 8th century BC, repudiated and judged by (God) for apostasy, but promised a reconciliation [to God] and reinstatement” by God to their special status as God’s people at some future time (Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 274)).

Paul, however, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, takes this Old Testament prophecy and applies it to the Gentiles to show their – *our* – inclusion in the spiritual blessings of God’s grace. Nothing could have been more surprising, or outrageous, to the religious leaders of Israel in the time of Jesus and then Paul. Those leaders, not least among them the Pharisees, were convinced that strict adherence to the law of Moses was the key to unlocking the door to God’s blessing and benediction.

Paul’s application of the prophecy is radically good news for people like you and me. It says that the gospel of God’s grace is not just for the Jews. It is for Gentiles, for non-Jews, as well. Through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, we who were formerly not God’s people are now God’s people. We who at one time were cut off from God’s covenant promises and love are now His beloved children. We who once were outsiders have now become members of God’s family. We who at one time were excluded from the blessings and promises of God’s covenant love have been welcomed inside. Not because of who we are, but because of what He has done. Not because of what we have done, but because of who He is.

The apostle Peter applies this same prophetic message to Christ’s followers, especially to Gentiles, in 1 Peter 2:10, where he says: “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

Surprise! The gospel is for outsiders, which is what we were, until the Lord Jesus drew us to Himself in faith. It was an unexpected surprise (I suppose every surprise, by definition, is unexpected!) to the first followers of Jesus when the message of the gospel began to produce a harvest of faith among the Gentiles. Hardly anybody saw it coming. Yet the gospel has truly produced a huge harvest around the world.

But what about the Jews? Most of them, sadly, rejected the gospel and refused to accept Jesus as the promised Messiah and Savior and Lord. In so doing, they forfeited the blessings of grace reserved for the followers of Jesus. The inclusion of non-Jews in God’s covenant of grace has been accompanied by a diminishing of the place of the Jews in God’s plan of salvation (though it must be said that God is not finished yet!). In verses 27 and 28, Paul quotes the prophet Isaiah to show that only a remnant of the Jews – those who are not just the physical descendants of Abraham, but his spiritual descendants – will be saved (Isaiah 10:22-23; cf. Romans 9:6).

And then there is the quote in verse 29 about Sodom and Gomorrah that we looked at last Sunday. As wicked as the people of those ancient cities were, *we* are just as deserving of God's judgment, and no more deserving of God's mercy than they. Yet, as I will keep on saying, God chooses to be merciful and gracious to sinners.

Does this mean that everyone will be saved? No. Like so many of the Jews, those who seek to merit salvation and attain righteousness by their good works and fulfillment of the law will never make it that way. Those who "stumble over the stumbling stone," who resist and reject the gospel, who refuse to trust in Jesus Christ and insist on going their own way through life, will not be saved. But all, Jew and Gentile alike, who trust in the Rock of our salvation, Jesus Christ – all who believe that a right relationship with God is not the result of following the rules and regulations of the law but is a gift of God's grace received through faith in Christ – *will be saved*. You can bet your life on it.

You never know when or in whom the Holy Spirit will do His gracious work of bringing an unbeliever to a living faith in Jesus. I'm reading a fascinating book called *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus* written by a devout Muslim young man named Nabeel Qureshi who – surprise! – comes to discover that the Bible really is God's Word and that Jesus really is the Son of God and Savior of the world. Who would have seen it coming? Well, maybe at least one person – Nabeel's friend David, a committed Christian who poured into Nabeel's life, discussing, arguing, challenging, sowing seeds that God used to bring Nabeel to Himself.

Michael Chua and his family are rejoicing today because his mother in Malaysia, a lifelong Buddhist, has professed her faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and was baptized yesterday in Michael's hometown of Kuala Trengganu. It is another surprise of God's grace! Michael, his brother and sister have been praying for their mother for many years, and now God has brought her to faith in the Lord Jesus.

Maybe your heart aches for someone you know who has turned away from the Christian faith, or who wants to have nothing to do with Jesus or the church. Maybe it is a member of your family. Maybe it is someone you know from work or school or sports. Maybe it is someone with a different belief system – a Jew or Muslim or Buddhist or New Ager. Maybe it is someone who has made a lifestyle choice that grieves your heart (and God's). Here is what I think God wants to say to you: Don't give up on them. Don't give up. If you can do nothing else, you can pray. But maybe the Lord wants you to plant some seeds. Maybe the Lord wants you to engage that person in a conversation about what he or she believes. Maybe the Lord wants you to demonstrate His love in a practical way that may soften their hearts.

Whatever you can do, don't give up. Pray that God will do in that person's life what He has done in so many others, including yours and mine – that He will surprise this one, that one, and many, many more with His transforming grace. And be sure to give Him all the thanks and praise when He does.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.