

# God of Surprise

John 3:22-35

## Sermon

*Hobart, January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2013*

*Devonport, February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2013*

*Launceston, February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013*

### **John 3:22-35**

<sup>22</sup> Then Jesus and his disciples left Jerusalem and went into the Judean countryside. Jesus spent some time with them there, baptizing people.

<sup>23</sup> At this time John the Baptist was baptizing at Aenon, near Salim, because there was plenty of water there; and people kept coming to him for baptism. <sup>24</sup> (This was before John was thrown into prison.) <sup>25</sup> A debate broke out between John's disciples and a certain Jew\* over ceremonial cleansing.

<sup>26</sup> So John's disciples came to him and said, "Rabbi, the man you met on the other side of the Jordan River, the one you identified as the Messiah, is also baptizing people. And everybody is going to him instead of coming to us."

<sup>27</sup> John replied, "No one can receive anything unless God gives it from heaven. <sup>28</sup> You yourselves know how plainly I told you, 'I am not the Messiah. I am only here to prepare the way for him.' <sup>29</sup> It is the bridegroom who marries the bride, and the best man is simply glad to stand with him and hear his vows. Therefore, I am filled with joy at his success. <sup>30</sup> He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less.

<sup>31</sup> "He has come from above and is greater than anyone else. We are of the earth, and we speak of earthly things, but he has come from heaven and is greater than anyone else. \* <sup>32</sup> He testifies about what he has seen and heard, but how few believe what he tells them! <sup>33</sup> Anyone who accepts his testimony can affirm that God is true. <sup>34</sup> For he is sent by God. He speaks God's words, for God gives him the Spirit without limit. <sup>35</sup> The Father loves his Son and has put everything into his hands. <sup>36</sup> And anyone who believes in God's Son has eternal life. Anyone who doesn't obey the Son will never experience eternal life but remains under God's angry judgment."

<sup>1</sup>

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\* Some manuscripts read *some Jews*.

\* Some manuscripts omit *and is greater than anyone else*.

<sup>1</sup>Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. "Text edition"--Spine. (2nd ed.) (Jn 3:22-36). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

## INTRODUCTION:

### I. DO YOU LIKE SURPRISES?

#### A. A SURPRISE PARTY FOR A BIRTHDAY OR ANNIVERSARY?

1. A surprise visit by someone unexpected?
2. A surprise present?
3. A surprise meal?

#### B. A SURPRISE, BY DEFINITION IS SOMETHING WE DID NOT EXPECT, POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE

1. I was at the cricket on Thursday, and during a break I went for a walk and an old friend from Melbourne was right there in front of me
  - a) It wasn't a complete surprise because I knew he was moving to Hobart, but I didn't expect to see him at the cricket
  - b) If he had told me ahead of time he would be there, and at that location at that time, it would not have been a surprise at all
2. Also if I didn't know him at all, then it would not have been a surprise, he would have just been another face in the crowd

#### C. OF COURSE NOT ALL SURPRISES ARE GOOD

1. For instance if you came around a corner in town and came face to face with a lion escaped from the circus, it would be a fearful and unwanted surprise.
2. Some things come upon us in life that are more scary than happy, and often a danger to us such as an accident or an illness

#### D. WE TEND TO THINK OF A SURPRISE AS BEING A PHYSICAL OCCURRENCE,

1. A good or bad action or event

2. But we can also be surprised by facts, by knowledge or insights about life and reality that catch us off guard
3. We can suddenly discover that something we presumed to be a solid fact or truth, is in fact in error
4. Or vice-versa
  - a) That something we always believed to be in error, is in fact correct

**E. SURPRISES ABOUT FACTS AND BELIEFS CAN ALSO BE SEEN AS POSITIVE, EXCITING, ENLIGHTENING AND HELPFUL**

1. We have experienced a whole series of profound theological and spiritual surprises and deeply confronting challenges to our assumptions and dearly held viewpoints over the years
2. But all too often new or different ideas and beliefs can be seen as unwelcome, threatening, disturbing and disorienting
  - a) To the point where we can become very nervous about any further ideas that are new or different
  - b) And where we are certainly not actively looking for new or different ideas and viewpoints.
  - c) We feel, that's enough.
    - (1) I've done enough changing. I am happy and confident where I am, and now want to set my camp up here and dig some fixed foundations, erect some good fences, and stay safe and secure and comfortably at this point for the rest of my life.
3. But we are all different
  - a) Some of us prefer to continue to look for new things, and find it hard to be satisfied with the status quo.
4. It is a bit like those who like to stay home for holiday breaks or always go to the same place and stay within familiar and comfortable surroundings, compared to
5. those who like to go adventuring,

a) looking for new places, people, experiences and a broadening of their understanding and appreciation of the wide and varied world in which we live

6. Some people are just more naturally adventurous and others prefer comfort and less stressful experience of being surrounded by the familiar and well-known

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### S.P.S:

#### **A. BUT WHEN IT COMES TO THE CHRISTIAN LIFE:**

1. We are all called on an adventurous and confronting journey, full of surprises, adventures and new ideas and insights, constant challenges to our entrenched ideas and attitudes; the turning upside down of the old and familiar by a constant flow of new and even shocking truths and realities that appear around each corner

2. Today we are going to be looking at a small part of the life of John the Baptist, who came to make straight paths for the coming of Jesus.

a) And see what we can learn about being prepared to be challenged and surprised by God on a continual basis

#### **B. PRAYER**

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## BODY:

### C. JOHN THE BAPIST

1. John the Baptist played a pivotal role in the journey of Israel with God
  - a) He was the bridge between the Old and the New
2. He was the last of the OT prophets, and the first of the New
3. He reached out to OT Israel as God's messenger
  - a) Putting the Old Covenant into perspective
  - b) And "making straight paths" for them into surprises that lay ahead
4. John prepared them for a huge change, for the greatest surprise in their history
  - a) The coming of Messiah, the fulfilment and replacement of all that had gone before
5. John was there to help them be ready, to prepare their hearts and minds for the great changes and challenges that lay immediately before them—the new things God was about to do

### D. EVEN JOHN'S DISCIPLES FOUND JESUS CHALLENGING

#### John 3:22-35

<sup>22</sup> Then Jesus and his disciples left Jerusalem and went into the Judean countryside. Jesus spent some time with them there, baptizing people.

<sup>23</sup> At this time John the Baptist was baptizing at Aenon, near Salim, because there was plenty of water there; and people kept coming to him for baptism. <sup>24</sup> (This was before John was thrown into prison.) <sup>25</sup> A debate broke out between John's disciples and a certain Jew\* over ceremonial cleansing. <sup>26</sup> So John's disciples came to him and said, "Rabbi, the man you met on the other side of the Jordan River, the one you

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identified as the Messiah, is also baptizing people. And everybody is going to him instead of coming to us.”

### **E. WHAT IS GOING ON IN THEIR MINDS?**

1. This wasn't a comfortable situation for them
  - a) They were afraid that they and their leader, John, were losing their position and popularity
2. Why is their reaction, while humanly understandable, in reality incongruous and ironic, and seriously flawed?
  - a) The task of John and his disciples was actually to point people away from themselves and to Jesus—to prepare them to be truly cleansed—but in a very different way.
  - b) This was what they were there to accomplish
  - c) But they were comfortable with how things were, and for them Jesus growing prominence was an unwanted surprise.

<sup>27</sup> John replied, “No one can receive anything unless God gives it from heaven. <sup>28</sup> You yourselves know how plainly I told you, ‘I am not the Messiah. I am only here to prepare the way for him.’ <sup>29</sup> It is the bridegroom who marries the bride, and the best man is simply glad to stand with him and hear his vows. Therefore, I am filled with joy at his success. <sup>30</sup> He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less.

### **F. WHAT AN EXEMPLARY ATTITUDE!**

1. John was there to serve Jesus, to do what he was called and inspired to do,
  - a) And to do it humbly and with sincere dedication
2. Our ideas, expectations and our wills must become less and less, in order to allow Jesus' ways to become greater and greater in our lives and thinking

<sup>31</sup> “He has come from above and is greater than anyone else. We are of the earth, and we speak of earthly things, but he has come from heaven and is greater than anyone else.\*

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\* Some manuscripts omit *and is greater than anyone else*.

## **G. TRUE PERSPECTIVE ON LIFE AND REALITY**

### 1. Jesus is from God.

a) As the apostle John also made clear,

(1) Jesus was from God, he was with God from the beginning, he was God, and now he has become one of us in our world, which he created

b) Back to John the Baptist;

31b We are of the earth, and we speak of earthly things, but he has come from heaven and is greater than anyone else.\*

### 2. Craig Hovey, in his book, “Unexpected Jesus; the Gospel as Surprise” notes that our being surprised reveals that we didn’t know as much as we assumed we did.

Our experience of surprise thus witnesses to what is incomplete about our knowing.

a) In other words, if we knew there was a lion around the corner, we wouldn’t be surprised by it. It is that we so firmly presumed there wouldn’t be, that we are so shocked and unprepared.

b) This works with our presumptions about other people, and particularly about God, and his ways.

### 3. Hovey continues;

...our overreaching through knowing and knowledge is not only a way of preparing ourselves in order to avoid the possibility that we will be surprised. It is actually part of our actual response to the wonder, or rather our refusal to wonder appropriately.

### 4. We seek fixed, static and sure knowledge and deeper understanding so we don’t need to wonder, we don’t need to change, and so we won’t be found wrong or end up surprised.

a) But that leads to stagnation, dogmatism and defensiveness, a focus on rules and facts rather than life and relationships, change and growth in an ever continuing journey with Jesus as our partner and guide.

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\* Some manuscripts omit *and is greater than anyone else*.

31b We are of the earth, and we speak of earthly things,

5. We tend to want to focus on the here and now, and from our narrow, earthly, human perspective
6. In our small worlds we too often lose the wonder and delight in exploring and discovery that small children and the more adventurous have.
7. This is part of what Jesus was getting at when he said we need to become more like little children.

#### **H. HOVEY ADDS:**

Conversely, if there is a salutary “wanting to be surprised,” it may arise out of having come to a better appreciation for our limits as knowers.<sup>2</sup>

1. John the Baptist understood the true perspective of our lives and words and ideas
  - a) We are earth bound and limited
  - b) We don’t have a full grip on the entirety of reality, of life and existence, or of all that has happened down through time, let alone beyond time, beyond our temporal earthly sphere
2. Jesus is the only one who does
  - a) So we need to put our lives in his hands, which means letting go, and trusting him, rather than ourselves and the ideas and expectations of the society around us

<sup>31</sup> “He has come from above and is greater than anyone else. We are of the earth, and we speak of earthly things, but he has come from heaven and is greater than anyone else.\*

#### **I. JOHN THE BAPTIST CONTINUES TO CORRECT HIS DISCIPLES THINKING**

1. And he elaborates on who Jesus is, and how they (and all of us) should humbly submit our hearts, minds, beliefs and opinions to him

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<sup>2</sup> Craig Hovey, *Unexpected Jesus; The Gospel as Surprise*, Cascade Books, 2012, p. 19.

\* Some manuscripts omit *and is greater than anyone else*.

- a) And be prepared to be continually surprised and challenged to change our thinking, to jettison our wrong ideas and grow in his understanding

32a He testifies about what he has seen and heard,

**J. JESUS REALLY KNOWS WHAT HE IS TALKING ABOUT, HE HAS AN ETERNAL, GOD PERSPECTIVE.**

1. So we should meekly, and with eager appetites listen and be changed by the experience

32b but how few believe what he tells them!

**K. JOHN EXPRESSES WHAT A SURPRISE, A SHOCKING ONE, IT IS THAT GIVEN WHO JESUS IS, HOW FEW BELIEVE HIM**

1. Surprise involves being confronted with something unexpected. Something that does not fit our desires, assumptions, our existing understanding or expectations.
2. How few are prepared to be surprised and trust Jesus to challenge, change and expand their rigid self-centred thinking
3. Hovey comments on this;

The gospel forever confronts a world whose unbelief in God is nurtured by its more determined convictions about limited options and meager possibilities. For the world to move from unbelief to faith, from rebellion to submission, God mounts a continual confrontation of surprises against it. Most surprising of all, though, is God's recruitment of the church in doing so. Paul understood his own conversion in these terms; God not only surprised Paul on the Damascus road, but Paul's Christianity became God's surprise to the church.

This means that integral to the church's mission is not only its ability to come to terms with a God who is determined to surprise it.

It is also the facility for living with uncertainty—not that God will not again surprise, but that God remains God and is surprise's true source.

What is the manner of this living? How can this people's expectation of a God of surprise keep from hardening into the kind of knowledge that, at best, cannot help witnessing to a false god, if not a dead one?<sup>3</sup>

**L. THIS IS THE CHALLENGE OF OUR CHRISTIAN FAITH, AND THE CALLING OF ALL OF US WHO ARE GOD'S PEOPLE, HIS CHURCH**

1. To live and testify to the God who is true, the God who is constantly surprising us and the world through his Son and His Spirit, and hopefully through us

<sup>33</sup> Anyone who accepts his testimony can affirm that God is true. <sup>34</sup> For he is sent by God. He speaks God's words, for God gives him the Spirit without limit.

**M. BECAUSE GOD IS NOT PART OF THE WORLD WE KNOW**

1. And he is not controlled or encompassed or limited to what we know, or expect or are comfortable and familiar with, he is continually going to shock, jolt and surprise us
2. It is only through Jesus, God in human form, and the Holy Spirit, that the truth of God is revealed
3. And that truth isn't a set of rules, static written formulae or definitions, but a living, breathing personal being. Jesus Christ!
  - a) And he doesn't conform to our expectations or limited understanding or proclamations about him and his Father

**N. LIVING BY FAITH**

1. Hovey writes;

The paradox lies in simultaneously trusting that God will act to fulfil the divine promises while also admitting ignorance of how this might happen. It is therefore the central dynamic of a living faith.<sup>4</sup>

2. Jesus has to be accepted and understood in his terms, not ours

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<sup>3</sup> Hovey, p.22

<sup>4</sup> Hovey, p.21

- a) And that is what we call “faith”
- b) Trusting and believing that God will be who he says he is, reliably, but always surprisingly in new and amazing things!
- c) We don’t have the ability to predict or define what he will do, when, or how
- d) Just that he will always live up to what he promises us

<sup>35</sup> The Father loves his Son and has put everything into his hands. <sup>36</sup> And anyone who believes in God’s Son has eternal life. Anyone who doesn’t obey the Son will never experience eternal life but remains under God’s angry judgment.”

3. There is great benefit in accepting the surprising, the jolting and counter-intuitive teaching of Jesus about God and the realities of life, the universe and everything

- a) But on the other hand, there are terrible consequences for those who refuse to hear and believe Jesus

**O. IN THE END WE HOPE THAT ALL PEOPLE WILL BE SO POSITIVELY SURPRISED ABOUT WHO GOD IS**

- 1. About his unreasonable, almost unbelievable unconditional love and grace,
  - 2. About how he became one of us, not to judge and write us off, but to adopt us into his family,
  - 3. That they will give up on holding their stubborn and distorted views, and accept all that he is, and all he has to offer through his Son, and enter into the life of eternal surprise and joy that he has for them
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**II. WHEN WE SURVEY GOD'S INTERACTION WITH MANKIND; IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN FULL OF SURPRISE**

**A. FULL OF THE UNEXPECTED AND THE AMAZING**

**B. AND PEOPLE HAVE CONSISTENTLY HAD TROUBLE ACCEPTING GOD AND HIS UNORTHODOX AND PARADOXICAL WAYS**

1. Creating the universe out of nothing still boggles our minds, and those of scientists and atheists
2. Abraham and Sarah were surprised on many occasions, particularly by the birth of Isaac
3. There were surprises galore for all involved in the Exodus from Egypt, both the Israelites and the Egyptians
4. Many were surprised in the OT negatively as well as positively;
  - a) Adam and Eve, and Israel were surprised when their choices to live independently of God turned out so badly,
  - b) But Noah, Joseph, Moses, and David were hugely surprised by God's rescuing them from impossible situations in ways they could never have imagined

**C. IN THE NT**

1. Jesus' birth, its time and place, circumstances and implications was the greatest surprise of all
2. Mary and Joseph were totally surprised by what the angels told them
3. As we have read John the Baptist's disciple surprised by Jesus, but later even John the Baptist himself questioned if Jesus was indeed the Messiah, because he wasn't doing what John expected
4. The disciples were shocked and surprised by Jesus' actions and teachings just about every day of their time with him

5. The religious leaders were surprised and outraged by him
6. Pilate was so surprised and puzzled by Jesus, that he washed his hands of responsibility for the decision about his fate
7. The crucifixion was a massive surprise and upheaval the life of Peter and the other followers of Jesus
  - a) And what we read about Jesus' resurrection is one surprise after another
8. As already mentioned, Saul, who became Paul experienced one of the most profound and transforming surprises of all
  - a) And went on to teach and expound the surprises of Jesus and the Gospel more comprehensively than anyone else

**D. SO IT IS CLEAR FROM REPEATED EXAMPLES THAT WITH GOD, ALL WE CAN RELIABLY EXPECT IS THE UNEXPECTED**

1. When we or others expect the expected, when we think we have God and his future actions all nailed down and circumscribed, then we are sure to be in for a bunch of surprises

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**III. SO WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM ALL OF THIS**

**A. NOT TO GET IN A RUT, OR TOO SURE THAT WE HAVE GOD AND HIS WAYS ALL FIGURED OUT**

1. Not to let ourselves become lethargic or closed in our thinking
  - a) Not putting our energies into resisting and fighting off new ideas or insights about God and his ways and future plans

- b) Not becoming like the disciples of John who didn't like someone else coming along with new and different methods and ideas
- c) Not being like too many religious people down through the ages, including many of the Israelites, and the leaders in Jesus' time, whose intransigence and dogmatism blinded them to the totally new things God was doing

**B. JOHN THE BAPTIST GAVE SAGE ADVICE FOR HIS DISCIPLES AND ALL OF US;**

1. He spoke to his disciples about humility

- a) About recognizing our humanity, our limitations
- b) Not striving to be right, but humbly standing aside our views and any feelings of superiority or being the ones who have it right, or deserve listening to

John 3:27 John replied, "No one can receive anything unless God gives it from heaven. <sup>28</sup> You yourselves know how plainly I told you, 'I am not the Messiah. I am only here to prepare the way for him.' <sup>29</sup> It is the bridegroom who marries the bride, and the best man is simply glad to stand with him and hear his vows. Therefore, I am filled with joy at his success. <sup>30</sup> He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less. <sup>31</sup> "He has come from above and is greater than anyone else. We are of the earth, and we speak of earthly things, but he has come from heaven and is greater than anyone else.\*

2. It is not what we think and do that is important

- a) Our role is to listen, learn and partner with Jesus in what he is doing
  - (1) Not go off in our own directions, and then find out after a time that we are actually going opposite to Jesus

3. John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus

V28. 'I am not the Messiah. I am only here to prepare the way for him.'

- a) He did this by always making sure Jesus' was the focus, not himself

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\* Some manuscripts omit *and is greater than anyone else*.

- b) Ironically, John the Baptist in growing less and less became greater and greater;
  - c) Jesus said there were none greater than John
  - 4. John the Baptist was there to help the people of Judah to accept Jesus
    - a) To make straight paths, to smooth out the rough roads
    - b) To help them humble themselves, and repent, have a change of heart and mind so they would be ready for the surprise of Jesus and his message and his salvation
    - c) To help them get rid of the distortions in their religious roads, the things that would make it hard for them to accept Jesus and his radically different teachings
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## CONCLUSION:

### **A. THIS IS WHAT WE ALWAYS NEED TO BE DOING**

- 1. Remembering that God is God and we aren't
- 2. Remembering that Jesus is the only one who really has all the truth
- 3. And that our salvation isn't about having static, dogmatic, correct theoretical knowledge about facts and events
  - a) But about God's dynamic, lively, challenging, moving life of love and grace and creativity

### **A. JUST AS JOHN THE BAPTIST DID;**

- 1. We need God's help to make straight the roads of our hearts and minds, and make them more and more receptive to Jesus and the amazing and continual surprises he brings to us
- 2. It isn't that we know nothing, but that we don't know it all

3. Jesus' shows us that there is much more to God, and to life, to the present, to our world and our problems than we can know

4. His ways and his solutions, his salvation is all much more wondrous and amazing, deep and incredible than what our limited thinking and understanding presently contain or expect

**B. SO LET'S BE OPEN, READY AND EAGER TO BE SURPRISED OVER AND OVER AGAIN**

1. By our God of Surprises

2. To curiously, trustingly, confidently, actively watch for, expect and be ready to be challenged by what God may have waiting around the next corner of our lives, our relationships, and our Christian thinking and understanding

**C. PRAYER**