

A Surprising Turnaround
Part 1 of Sermon Series:
Surprise! The Unexpected Acts of God

a sermon based on

Acts 5:27-32
(with reference to John 20:19-23)

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Now that we're in the Easter season – I'd like to take us in little bit of a different direction, with the theme of discovering Surprise! (in) the Unexpected Acts of God. That'll be the theme for the next seven weeks until Pentecost.

For the first surprise rather than talking about Thomas' change of heart once he actually got to see the risen Lord, I'd like us to go back to that passage from Acts that we heard a few moments ago. How many of you felt *surprise* at that passage? Was anyone surprised when Peter said, "We must obey God rather than any human authority."? (Acts 5:29)

Does that seem like a weird question to you? Like why should we be "*surprised*" that's what happened? Right? But let's look at the circumstances.

Peter and the apostles had been dragged in front of the religious leaders for preaching in Jesus' name when they'd been specifically told not to. Not only that they'd been doing it in the temple and the synagogues.

But this is Peter who after telling Jesus that he believed he was the Messiah – the Christ – argued with Jesus about dying in Jerusalem. This is Peter who told Jesus, "No," when he kneeled down to wash his feet. This is Peter who denied even knowing Jesus three times on the night that he was arrested. Do you see the surprise now?

Peter had a turnaround. By presenting himself to Peter after his Resurrection, Jesus changed him. No more do we hear about the Peter who didn't know what to say and therefore blurted out the first thing that crossed his mind. Instead, Peter has become the rock whom Jesus said he would be.

What's most surprising might be how bold he was – not in pledging to obey God over people, but in the circumstances. Whenever he said something wrong around Jesus, at least he knew that Jesus was forgiving and merciful. People – especially people who are in charge and want to stay in charge – not so much. Maybe it's not surprising because we didn't get the full magnitude of what was happening. You see, when Peter finished that little speech that we just heard, the next line of Scripture - Acts 5:33 - says, "When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them." Obeying God was dangerous. It often is. Sometimes it is life-threateningly so. Sometimes in other ways that are dangerous to us in other ways whether it be financial security or freedom.

For Peter that meant facing criticism from the other apostles after he went to the home of Cornelius the centurion – a Roman soldier and a Gentile – and then baptizing him and his household.(Acts 11) It wasn't even just that Peter had baptized this Gentile – it was a scandal that, as a Jew, Peter would even enter his home. He could have been ostracized from the still burgeoning church. And then what? But God had given him a vision. (Acts 10) He was obeying God – even when God seemed to have changed the rules he had established.

Later on Peter would be thrown into prison by Herod and bound in chains, to be spared only until after the Passover had passed. Lest there be any doubt about Herod's intentions, he had just killed James the brother of John. He just didn't get to Peter in time before the Passover. Why? Because he was preaching the Gospel. (Acts 12:1-4)

Peter's not the only one who faced challenges for obeying God.

Paul and Silas were thrown into prison and put in stocks for casting out a demon from a slave girl forced into fortune telling by her owners. (Acts 16:16-23)

While he was in Lystra with Barnabas, Paul healed a man. When the people there wanted to make sacrifices to him as the incarnation of the god Hermes, he refused. So what was his reward? Some of the Jewish leaders had him stoned to death and thrown over the side of the city wall. (Acts 14:1-19)

Further back in history we hear how Elijah had to run for his life and to hide in a cave, when Jezebel set her sights on him after he vindicated the prophets of the Lord whom she had killed by embarrassing and slaying her prophets. (1Kings 19:1-9)

We can go back to a story you may remember from Sunday School Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. You probably remember them better as Shadrach, Meshach and Abendego rather than by their Hebrew names; but those were the name imposed on them by the Babylonians. Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah chose to obey God and were thrown into a fire furnace for refusing to worship Nebuchadnezzar's gods or to bow down to his golden statue. (Dan. 3:1-22)

Daniel insisted on keeping his prayer time with the Lord God, and was rewarded by being thrown into a den of hungry lions. (Dan. 6:1-17)

Or what about a couple of more recent stories – stories you probably don't know about? Jim O'Connell the lay leader at Kaneville United Methodist Church when I served there. (I asked for and got his permission to share this.) As a trucking dispatcher for a company that moved heavy equipment, Jim came to the men's prayer meeting asking for prayer. His company had accepted a rather lucrative contract with an impending deadline, but the permits to make the delivery legally just weren't coming through; but to refuse would mean he would be looking for employment elsewhere. He wouldn't do it.

A fellow student in seminary, Vin, shared how he had been imprisoned before escaping Vietnam for merely being a Christian and refusing to renounce his faith.

Huh? Now that I think about it, I've probably not given you much to encourage obedience to God. Have I?

Surprise! There's more. Vin told how God used his refusal to renounce Jesus and his devotion converted several of those prison guards.

He may have been encouraged by Paul and Silas, who after being imprisoned for freeing that slave girl spent the night praising and singing hymns so that the prison doors broke open, but because of their obedience to God the jailer received the gift of salvation in Jesus' name. When that jailer was overwhelmed and felt hopeless at the impending escape of the prisoners and had decided to kill himself, God moved Paul and Silas to remain – to provide hope to that man because God loved him. (Acts 16:24-34)

Likewise, even though he'd been thrown over that wall in Lystra dead, God raised Paul up to continue his work. (Acts 14:20)

Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah didn't burn up in that furnace. Instead an angel of the Lord stood with them, testifying to the power of the one true God. (Dan. 3:23-30)

Those hungry lions were still hungry the next morning when King Darius came to check on Daniel just sitting in their midst. (Dan. 6:18-24)

God delivered Elijah and he would go on to prepare Elisha to continue the ministry. (1Kings 19:10-21)

Peter – rather than being cast out from among the disciples after visiting with a Gentile – empowered the rest of them (Acts 11:1-18) to go out to Persia, India and China, to Britain and Spain, to Egypt and Ethiopia, to Asia (what we call Turkey) and to Rome – anywhere ANY people might be in need to hear the word of the Lord.

And when Peter was imprisoned and chained up by Herod, just waiting for execution, God sent his angel to break his chains and to cast open the prison doors so that he could walk out right past his guards. (Acts 12:5-11)

And in this account that we read to day, God imparted a leading Pharisee, Gamaliel, with the wisdom to suggest they let him go free, because if he were lying, he would fail, but that if he were obeying God there would be no way to stop him. (Acts 5:34-42)

My brother in faith, Jim, took courage from his faith and the confidence that he gained from God's presence in that prayer group, he stood his ground and God provided permits for an alternative though not ideal route so that although he didn't do exactly what he was told to do by his employer, he kept his job.

When we obey God over and against any other person or institution, he will use us for some wonderful things. As the hymnist says, we don't need to preach like Peter or pray like Paul – "just tell the love of Jesus, and say he died for all."¹

When we claim the power of Jesus Christ and his resurrection he will do wonders.

Even though it's easy to claim that the world – our culture – our country – have abandoned God, because teachers don't lead prayer in public schools or someone gets bent out of shape about a nativity scene, when we turn to Jesus we might just see that the problem is different.

When we refuse to obey the worldly injunction to go on Facebook or Twitter or whatever to publicly shame those who have hurt us or with whom we disagree, and instead obey Jesus who offered mercy instead of condemnation, forgiveness instead of cruelty and blame – when we claim the power that he bestowed on those disciples huddled in that locked room when he breathed on them with the Holy Spirit and told them to take power – power that has been passed down to each of us – to forgive sins we change the world.

I'm reminded of a conversation that Mark Twain had with a renowned ruthless businessman who told him, "Before I die I mean to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I will climb Mount Sinai and read the Ten Commandments aloud at the top."

To which Twain replied, "I have a better idea. You could stay in Boston and keep them."²

See, we always think those big name characters in the Bible are special, because of the grand stories that have been handed down. Here's a surprise for you. You're special enough without those grand events. You are so special that Jesus defeated the cross so that by simply living out his love in the world more good can come than all of the miracles he worked through the prophets and apostles.

He promises you, that although the world may cast its consequences at you, that because you have been washed in the life giving blood of Jesus that you will prevail. So let's go out there and surprise the world, by undermining every hateful comment, every injustice, and every evil by confidently living out his will for us. AMEN.

¹ *There Is a Balm in Gilead*

² *Today in the Word*, September 1991, Moody Bible Institute found at <http://ministry127.com/resources/illustration/obedience-is-better-than-sacrifice>