

The Surprising Word

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We, by and large, see what we expect to see. That is so both for what we perceive and what we know. We expect our preconceptions to be confirmed. And we look for the data that confirms what we expect. The technical term for that is confirmation bias.

There is nothing wrong with this way of thinking. In fact, our brain was created to do just that. It is necessary for our survival. We assume that there is an intelligible order in the apparent deluge of raw data that we experience with all our senses at each moment of our existence. We then try to understand how what we see fits into our prior understanding of the world around us or whether it is at odds with what we expect. Our attention to particular details that contradict our preconceptions forces us to modify them and so enlarge and enrich our understanding.

I contend that both these approaches are necessary for us spiritually in hearing God's Word and receiving what it has to give to us. Our common confession of faith and our system of doctrine paint the general picture for us. They tell the big story of God's revelation in the Bible. They provide a map for us to find our place in the whole of it. They tell us what we can expect to find from the Bible as we read it and discover how we are part of it. But the welcome confirmation of our faith in what we can rightly expect to find as we read it needs the challenge that comes from the discovery of what we do not expect for our faith to grow, the challenge that comes from a word or detail, an image or concept that upsets our assumptions. That is often how the Holy Spirit deepens our faith, broadens our understanding and enriches our lives. The interplay of what is expected with what is unexpected turns what looks like an all too familiar story line into a multi-dimensional narrative.

In keeping with that, I follow a simple rule for reading and meditating on the Bible. It is: look for what is unexpected whether it be by the original audience, me, or the common opinion of most people. So, as study the Bible, I expect to be surprised. Even more than that, I expect to be amazed by what God says and does.

I could give many examples of this from both parts of the Bible, but will give only a few, which deal with same topic.

Consider Psalm 46! It says three things that are unexpected and surprising about Zion, the holy city of God. First, it is true that its fortification by its walls, towers and acropolis does protect its citizens from the armies of its earthly enemies. But it is the living God, the Lord of heavenly armies, who protects it from its spiritual enemies by his residence in it. He protects it from the power of cosmic chaos and international disorder as symbolized by an earthquake that shakes the earth so that its mountains topple and raises the waters of the sea in a tsunami that overwhelms the dry land. The weapon by which God saves the citizens of Zion is 'his voice' that melts the earth and overthrows the kingdoms of the world. He says, 'Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.' Second, he does not 'desolate' the unruly enemies of Zion by sacking their

cities with the force of arms as his people expected, but by disarming the enemies and putting an end to warfare on earth. What a surprising turnabout! He wreaks 'desolation' by the destruction of their weapons of warfare. Third, and most surprising of all, he calls on the citizens of Zion and all people to stop fighting and acknowledge him as the high Lord of the world; he tells them to 'be still' by relaxing their hands, dropping their weapons and letting him take over from them, because he alone is their 'refuge and strength,' 'a very present help in trouble.'

Consider another text with a similar topic, Matthew 16:18! There Jesus tells Peter that 'the gates of hell' will not 'prevail' against the church that he builds on Peter's confession of faith in him as 'the Christ, the Son of the living God.' I don't know about you but I automatically assume that this is a promise of safety for the church and its deliverance from the devil and the evil spirits that he deploys. It is, of course, true that Satan and all the powers of hell will never conquer the church. But that is not what Jesus actually says. He, unexpectedly and only here, mentions 'the gates of hell.' By speaking about hell's gates he envisages it as a fortified city and a prison with Satan as jailer. Its gates lock in its inhabitants and shut out its 'enemies' and their leader, Jesus. So Jesus upends our assumptions by claiming that the gates of hell will not be strong enough to hold out against the church and its ministry. In other words, the church is a dire threat to the devil's dominion and power. The church has the keys that unlock the gates of hell and release its prisoners from its power. That upends our common assumption that we need to defend the church from the devil. By its faith in Jesus as the Christ, the anointed King of heaven and earth it overcomes the reign of the devil here on earth. By the exercise of Christ's keys, Peter and his successors in ministry ransack hell and free captive souls from Satan and the powers of darkness.

Consider a third text that deals with spiritual warfare, 2 Corinthians 10: 4 which I quote in my own translation. There Paul has this to say about his ministry as an apostle: 'The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy self-talk and every high place that is raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.' Paul here compares the minds of unbelievers to a strong castle that keeps them safe from their enemies. In their pride and high self-regard they construct an impregnable, mental 'high place' that protect them from criticism. They build this inner fortress for their souls by their 'self-talk,' their fearful thoughts that are driven by their conscience which either accuses or condemn them (Rom 2:15). Ironically what is built as a defense against the accusation and condemnation of the devil, in fact, defends their souls from God and shuts him out. It 'protects' them from Jesus. Readers usually assume that Paul is talking about ideologies, arguments in our social order that undermine their faith in God. Instead of that, he envisages the souls of unbelievers as a fortress that is constructed to protect their unbelief and keep Jesus out. Jesus therefore comes to free them from themselves and their unacknowledged enemies. By the exercise of his God-given authority Paul pulls down the strongholds of unbelief and takes every thought captive for obedience to Jesus by the presence of Christ in them.

So my advice to you, dear reader of the Bible is this: Look for what is unexpected and prepare to be surprised and amazed by what you discover.