
Don't Be Surprised (Acts 24:10-21)

4/30/2017 Sermon by Pastor Jason Liebenow



I think I might need to get a new phone. I think it's already a whole year old! Does it ever amaze you how technology today just doesn't seem to last? People are constantly looking for what's new and improved. I've heard stories of people getting the newest thing only to find out it's already obsolete. People constantly have to get the newest and best or else be condemned to struggle with the old and outdated.

There are those things, however, where the old is better than the new. Think of how many fads you've seen in your lifetime. People spend all kinds of time and money on them and a couple months later it turns out it was all a waste. That time and money could have been better spent on something that's been around for a while; something with some lasting value, right?

Or think of the arts! There are all kinds of new songs and books out these days that really don't amount to much. Then there are the songs and stories that have stood the test of time; works that many people have found valuable for centuries and still do today!

Our God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. And so, what was true about God when he created the world is still true about God. We don't need "new and improved" teachings about God. Instead, what God has told us in his Word has lasting value. It has stood the test of time. That's why we still confess the same Apostles' Creed that Christians confessed almost two thousand years ago! God's Word was true when God first said, "Let there be," and it is still true today. We only need open a Bible.

And since that's all we need to do, Don't Be Surprised! What God has always wanted us to know is right here at our fingertips. Everything the God of the universe wants to tell you is right in a Bible. There's no reason that any of us should be surprised by what life throws at us because God has told us what we should expect and what we are headed for all in his Word. Today our God encourages us to listen to his Word, study it, know it, and Don't Be Surprised!

In our lesson from Acts, we find the apostle Paul on trial. He had been arrested in the temple and put before the Jewish leaders. But when Paul asserted his belief in

the resurrection, the crowd gathered to hear him nearly erupted into a riot and the Roman authorities had to take Paul into custody to stop the commotion.

Now on trial, Paul disproves the accusations against him, and explains that the real dispute between Paul and his accusers is religious. Paul, unlike his accusers, follows the Way, that is Jesus who called himself the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Paul's opponents hated Jesus because they saw his teachings as "new and improved" teachings about God. And so, they wanted to get rid of Jesus and all of his followers.

Paul, however, points out that he is not teaching anything new at all. Instead, he is teaching everything that is exactly in line with the Old Testament, what he calls the Law and the Prophets. The God revealed by Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection is the same God of the Old Testament who revealed himself to Abraham, who led the Israelites out of Egypt, and who spoke through the Prophets.

Unfortunately, the teachers of Israel did not understand this. They were surprised by Jesus and they did not like the surprise. Sure, they had studied the Scriptures, but they allowed their own wants and cultural expectations to shape their understanding of God's Word. Instead, they should have let God's Word explain God's Word.

In the end, they wanted things from God that he had never promised to give them and so they found themselves angry. They wanted a Messiah that God never promised, and they found themselves disappointed. They wanted a god that Scripture did not describe, and so they rejected the very God they thought they were following.

May God bless us so that we do not fall into the same trap! How easy it is for us to do exactly what those teachers did! For example: How many people aren't interested in going to heaven because they think heaven will be sitting in a church pew singing hymns for eternity? Not sure I'd want to go to heaven if that's all it was. Sounds like that would get old fast. But God never says that's what heaven will be! God describes heaven as a place without sin, pain, disease, suffering and death; a place where we can stand holy before God; a place where we can be eternally with our God who loved us enough to die for us! That does sound like a place I want to be for eternity!

How many people are angry at God because they prayed for something and didn't get it? They think God has cheated them and they get angry with him even though God never promised to give that specific thing to them in the first place! How many people think life should be a certain way and they can't believe in a God who would allow a world that was any different, even though God clearly tells us that this world is tainted by *our* sin?

It is all too easy for us to fall into this trap. Ask yourself this question. How much of what you believe comes from fiction? This question applies to anything we think really; our political views, our beliefs about marriage, what we consider right and wrong, even things like how the justice system works, what society and people are like, and how you look at yourself. How much of what you believe comes from real life, and how much of it comes from books or TV or that kind of thing? I can't tell you how many times I've been shocked to find out life isn't actually like it is in the movies!

That question especially applies to our understanding of God. How much of what we believe comes from our experience and how much comes from the Bible, from what God actually says? How much of what you believe can you prove is true using God's words instead of your own or someone else's?

With so many voices in our world, we easily believe things that God never told us to believe. With those beliefs, we end up demanding things of God that he never promised to give us. We end up surprised, disappointed, or angry even though we could have known the whole time, if we had only listened to God's Word in the first place.

The disciples from Luke, chapter 24, give us a perfect example of this too. If you read through the gospels, you will see that Jesus told his disciples over and over again that he would suffer, die, and rise again in three days. If the disciples had only listened to Jesus' unchanging words!

Just imagine how they would have felt on Good Friday if they *had* listened! Instead of deserting Jesus when he was arrested, they might have followed Jesus in awe of his fulfilled words. Instead of terror at seeing their dear friend tortured, they might have been filled with wonder at the depths of Jesus' love for them! As they

saw Jesus die, instead of weeping hopelessly, they might have excitedly whispered to each other that Jesus' words were coming true, that Sunday was coming! As Jesus' body lay in the tomb, instead of asking each other unanswerable questions, they might have waited in eager anticipation for that third day! On Sunday morning, instead of hiding in a locked room for fear that they too might suffer and die, they might have been the first ones at Jesus' empty tomb!

But the fact was they didn't listen to Jesus when he told them beforehand. And so those three days when Jesus was dead were the darkest and hardest days they ever faced. Then they were totally surprised when Jesus did rise from the dead! And it all could have been avoided if they only listened to Jesus' unchanging words.

Dear friends, Don't Be Surprised. The God who knows the Universe better than you know even yourself, in fact the God who knows you so well that he even knows the exact number of hairs on your head, that God has told you everything that he wants you to know in the Bible.

In the Bible, he has given you hope for the dark times. He has given you understanding for the confusing times. He has given you life for the times when you face death. He has given you love for when you are unlovable, wisdom for when you are foolish, and strength for when you are weak. Make every effort to know and understand what your God wants you to know and understand.

Do not make the mistakes that St. Paul's accusers made. Do not let your own wants and cultural expectations color your understanding of God. Instead, get to know God from what *He* says.

Do not make the mistakes that the disciples made when they saw Jesus arrested and put to death. Do not let what is immediately in front of you make you forget the things God has told you already to get you through those dark times.

Dear friends, do not be surprised. Do not be surprised when you find out that you are living in a sinful world, because God has already told you that. But all the more, do not be surprised when God gives you everything he promised you through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Do not be surprised when he forgives all your sins. Do not be surprised when he raises you and all people from the dead one day. Do not be surprised when he blesses you even in this sinful world. Amen.