

## Looking Ahead Through The Rearview Mirror God Uses the Usual



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When I was at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena I had a class with Peter Wagner, who at the time was seen as the #1 Church and Mission Growth expert in the world. During one of our classes we were talking about praying for healing. He asked if anyone had one leg which was shorter than the other leg. One of my class mates came forward saying that having one leg being shorter than the other had always been a problem and had caused him much back pain. So Peter Wagner had him sit down on a chair and we saw that his legs were actually different lengths. Then Peter placed his hands on the mans legs, began to pray, and as he did I watched as the short leg began to grow (right before our eyes) and ended up the exact length of the other leg. Now you need to know that I made sure that I was looking directly over Peter's Wagner's shoulder, and right at my left shoulder stood Pastor Sig Schuster was also watching intently, so you know there couldn't be any tricks going on there. Then Peter Wagner handed the man a form and said *"fill this out in 4 months and tell me if the healing has lasted. I am a researcher and I find that over 85% write me back and tell me that the healing is still present 4 months later"*. Crazy as it may seem, I saw the man's leg grow. In a few weeks time we will be looking at Acts 19:11,12 where it says that in Ephesus God empowered miracles were happening all the time. Wouldn't it be great if that was our everyday experience as believers? As I said a few weeks ago, I believe that we need to pray that God in his grace blesses us with more miracles as a church. But I also know that often there is a lot of life that happens between those kinds of miracles. As we wait for those miracles, which seem to happen outside of what we would call 'our normal' every day experiences, that it is easy to wish our lives away waiting for those extra-ordinary miracle filled times. As we do, I believe that we miss seeing God's hand at work, in miraculous ways, in the 'ordinary' but 'specific ways' God intervenes in our lives. We often miss seeing his hand at work in those ordinary times, which in some ways can be more profound than those times we so quickly classify as miraculous miracles. For example, what did it take for some of you to meet your spouse? How many little coincidences had to fall in place in precise order for that to happen. Or, for others, as you look back at how you became involved in your business or where you now live, or how you came to faith in Jesus, can you see the hand of God gently and graciously at work, at step, at time, putting people and circumstances in place to lead you to that person, that job or your faith in Jesus. This morning I want us to look

at some of those times when we see God using the USUAL to create UNUSUAL and miraculous results from the book of Acts.

## **The Convergence of the Natural and the Supernatural**

### **A Roman Citizen**

Acts 16:35-39

Slide #1 Last week as we studied Acts 16 we saw a number of miracles that seemed amazing. We saw a demon possessed lady freed in a supernatural way of her demons, and we saw an earthquake that shook at the prison and resulted in the salvation of a very tough ex-military man who was the Jailer of the prison. They were indeed extra-ordinary miracles. But turn back to Acts 16 and let me show you something that may at first glance seem 'less than spectacular' but really it has the hands of God all over it and it was used in amazing ways. Acts 16:35-39 In this situation the City officials in Philippi had Paul and Silas beaten with a bundle of rods (many times). Maybe because they dressed and looked Jewish it never crossed their minds that they could possibly be Roman Citizens. But when they heard that they had beaten Roman Citizens without a Roman trial they knew their lives and careers could be in grave danger, so they did whatever Paul asked of them. You see for most non-Romans it was *almost impossible* to gain Roman citizenship. Many of the top officials in non-Roman countries, try as they might, never received citizenship themselves, you couldn't buy it, it was a closed shop. But, like the American Express advertisement, "With membership comes privileges". If you had Roman Citizenship you could travel freely, could only be judged by Roman laws, and you had a freedom/protection very few others had. The fact that Paul had Roman Citizenship was amazing. You could have probably counted the number of Jews in Paul's day that had Roman citizenship on 1 hand. So how did Paul get this title? At a conference in Ephesus Professor Mark Wilson said that we often miss how unique Paul's background was. It's very possible that it happened in the following way: #1) Paul's grandparents were taken as slaves during a Jewish purge 30 years before during an religious uprising then, possibly through some act of amazing bravery they had done something so amazing that their Roman owners set them free, and with that freedom came the ability to work toward becoming citizens using the name of their former owners. #2) Then his grandparents had become very wealthy due to their tent making business. We know that Paul's family was rich because in order to be a citizen in Tarsus you had to own at least \$50,000 drachmas worth of land (\$1,250,000 US). (The fact that Paul's family had money

was probably the reason why Felix held Paul for 2 years in Caesarea. He was probably waiting for a bribe). Then, at this exact time in history Mark Wilson said that during one of the military campaigns of the Roman General Octavian's he believes that Paul's grandparents donated huge amounts of money (maybe tents etc.) to the general. The general, who we have just found archeological evidence, was known to repay that kind of help by bestowing Roman citizenship on his key allies. So the journey that gave Paul his citizenship may have included at time of slavery, followed by a huge increase in wealth by his grandparents which led to their gaining a citizenship. That citizenship in turn played a crucial role as Paul set out on his missionary journey. That citizenship opened doors for Paul, kept him safe at times and eventually enabled him to travel to the city of Rome under Roman protection where for a number of years he preached the gospel of Jesus. So while we can chart how Paul's citizenship happened, we shouldn't miss the hand prints of God on the journey, for that citizenship was a crucial piece of the puzzle in Paul taking the gospel to the Gentile world.

### **A Family Connection**

In a similar way we find God using family relationships as key factors in where the gospel went forth. As the first missionary journey left the church in Antioch, their first port of call is the Island of Cyprus. Acts 13:4. [#2] When I read this I want to ask why Cyprus? If you turn to Acts 4:36,37 the answer is simple. Barnabas grew up on the Island of Cyprus. So his first stop was to take the story of Jesus back to his family and maybe his hometown, for he wanted those in his family to hear about Jesus.

As we said a few weeks ago a similar thing happened in Acts 13. We read in verses 6,7 that the proconsul Sergius Paulus became a believer in Jesus (Acts 13:12). He was the first Roman official to embrace this new faith. What is interesting is that we find that from the town of Paphos, Paul and Barnabas travel (Acts 13:14) north to Antioch in the province of Pisidia [#3]. The fascinating thing is that they have unearthed a Roman pillar from that time period which has the name of Sergius Paulus' sons name Lucius on it. That leads us to believe that the *primary factor* in why the gospel of Jesus went north was because a father who had just found faith (Sergius Paulus) wanted his son (Lucius) to be touched by this same faith and same Jesus who had touched his heart. Again, while at times God directed Paul's missionary travels by dreams and prophet words, just as key in formulating Paul's journey plans were family tie, Barnabas' family connections on Cyprus and Sergius Paulus' sons

home Antioch in Pisidia. Here is God using family ties as *pieces in the puzzle* in his grand scheme to touch the world with the gospel of Jesus.

### **A need for Fresh Air**

Acts 13:14;14:1,8,20

On each of Paul's missionary journeys you will find him traveling north into the wild mountainous country know as the Galician region of Turkey. These are the churches which the book of Galatians was written to. These were the fore-fathers of the Celts in Britain. [#6] I always wondered why Paul traveled so far north into this beautiful, but dangerous mountainous country were it was hard work walking through the mountains, and at times dangerous because of robbers. So why did he keep going back here? Let's do a little detective work. Turn to II Cor. 12:7-9. It is obvious Paul has some kind of illness (a thorn in his flesh) which keeps coming back, discouraging him and leaving him physically broken. People have often wondered what this disease was. Turn to Gal. 4:14,15 It would seem that there were a number of times when Paul was among them when this 'thorn in the flesh' flared up and that at times one of the side affects was related to eye sight and maybe eye pain, for it says they were willing to give up their sight for him. Many scholars believe that Paul had recurring malaria which he picked up in the swamp country around Tarsus or Perga, which kept flaring up throughout his life. However, one place he could go where the affects of malaria seemed to lesson was in the cool mountainous country of Galatia. So his illness may have been a *key piece in the puzzle* which ended up taking Paul north with the gospel of Christ. Isn't that fascinating? His illness was a key factor in many people in Northern Turkey finding faith. It is so easy to think that when we are struggling with some illness or something hard in our lives that God can't use it in the lives of others. Here is an example where God used something that Paul struggled with to change the course of many other peoples lives.

### **A Family in Turmoil**

Acts 23:12-17

One other simple example of the "usual becomes unusual" used in the movement of God. Turn to Acts 23:12-17 It would seem that a group of men made an oath to not eat until Paul was dead. Did you see who brought forward the plans for the plot of kill Paul? It was his nephew, his sister's son. I wonder if he heard of the plot because his dad or some other relative was part of the group planning to kill his uncle. But here, a nephew heard a rumour, was sent by his mom to save her brothers life. God was able to use even the situation of a

family in turmoil to save the life of Paul. People in the right place at the right time, pieces in the puzzle, who were necessary to save Paul's life so that the gospel of Jesus would travel all the way to Rome as a prophetic word had earlier foretold.

Let me give you an example of how God uses the usual to do unusual things. Many of you know that my Kathy is a Resident in the Chaplain program at the hospitals here in the city. Do you know how you grow a chaplain? First, when our family needed a second income Kathy went to work at the hospital as Unit Clerk (she did that for 10 years). Then you place beside that 30 years of shared ministry experience right beside her husband. Then add a passion for people that drew her to work for 5 years completing a Masters in Counseling degree from Providence Seminary. Finally, add a heart for those who are going through times of grief and struggle. And the result of all these experiences and passions being placed together is - a Hospital Chaplain. God put the ordinary puzzle pieces of her life together to bring her to what she is called to do today. And while that journey may not seem as 'spectacular' as a blinding light on the road to Damascus, it's just as 'profoundly' a work of God.

In every case we have just mentioned we have seen the hand of God using ordinary experiences in people's lives. This includes connections among family members, even areas of struggle and family turmoil, to produced life changing, direction changing, life altering events in peoples lives. God using the usual to do amazing and unusual things. God using the natural to make supernatural things happen. As I saw these things unfolding in the book of Acts I found that I needed to re-evaluate how I have been seeing God do the miraculous. I think we need to look in a different way at how God intervenes in our lives in those small, seemingly insignificant ways, for I think they are more significant, more profound and more miraculous than we have been realizing.

## **Living in the Context of a Daily Encounter**

So how can we be more observant concerning what God is supernaturally doing in our lives? Prepared in advance. Look at ways God has been working ahead of you. It demands a mind change instead of looking just for those big things as being signs of God's presence, we need to look and expect that God will use the small, daily, ordinary things in our lives to do things that will have eternal consequences. I can say that because of what Ephesians 2:10 says. It is saying that before big and small things happen in our lives, God had a hand in setting the stage for them to happen. In the Old Testament Esther became the queen so that

at that exact right moment *‘for such a time as this...’* she would be able to save her people. It is the idea that God quietly sets the stage so that at the exact right time we can enter the stage to say the lines God needed you to say.

It is like my being raised as the son of a pastor. Without knowing it I was watching how dad did ministry, so that when I finally said yes to being a pastor there were so many lessons I had already learned *in advance*.

It is like loving to cook and joining our ladies who just made another 250 apples pies which have been sold so they can send another \$1700 to an Orphanage called Chain of Love in Brazil.

It is like feeling a tug toward Muslim people and asking the Lord to open an opportunity to, in a caring way, show Jesus to them, and having the opportunity to spend time the very next day speaking to a Muslim man.

It begins with us looking for those places which we believe that God has been preparing us for, has been walking ahead of us in, then celebrating them as miracles of God, and walking with confidence and thanksgiving in those areas.

### **Live in the light of eternity**

Phil 1:20

Here is Paul saying I will live in such a way that my life will make a difference today. I will live in such a way that TODAY will have eternal consequences. I will live as if this is the only day I have. So often we live as if there will always be a tomorrow, or always be another day to be loving to our kids or our spouse. Or that there will sometime in the future be a time when we can live in a better way for Jesus. And we forget that it is in the small comments, the ongoing faithful walk with our God that others see and hear Jesus lived through us. If you are living a Manny Christian life, *the maybe tomorrow, or waiting for God to use you in the big events and big issues*, know that it is in the little things, the unseen faithful actions and words that God is the most pleased. And often have the most profound impact on those around us.

### **God loves to use the unusual**

In the life of Jesus we see him using the usual, the normal in unusual ways. In John 6:9 we read these amazing words. *“Here is a boy with 5 small barley loaves and 2 small fish, but how far will they go among so many?”* Andrew said all we found was 1 small bag lunch, so common, so small, so insignificant that it has no chance of making a profound impact on this

group of 7-8000 lives. Then Jesus prayed over this little lunch and not only were 7000 plus people feed but I bet when they left the meeting the people only talked about one thing. *How could Jesus take such a little insignificant bag lunch and feed so many?* And I'll bet that story stuck with them for the rest of their lives. Something small, given to Jesus can make a profound difference in people's lives. Plus, for the rest of his life the little boy was amazed at how Jesus had used him, touched him, done a miracle through him.

The same story happened in John 2:6-11 when Jesus took something as usual as 6 pots of water and with a word made 940 bottles of wine. The wedding was a success and everyone took home an armful of wine which showed Jesus ability to create abundance and meet needs beyond anyone's expectations. Something as insignificant as water, when given to Jesus has the ability to create an abundance in other people's lives which blows them away.

The point of what we have seen in how God uses simple, ordinary things to do extraordinary things is that we never know how God can use our small faithfulness, the small turns of our lives, the things we grew up with, the struggles we have gone through, the small passions of our heart, when given in faithfulness to do amazing things. We need to look for those small things God is doing in our lives and celebrate them greatly. We need to see them as pieces in a puzzle that though they may seem as insignificant as a bag lunch in our hands may have the ability to touch 1000's of peoples lives. We need to determine to live faithful Christians lives in the small, usual, every day aspects of our lives because we never know when and how Jesus will use them in unusual and significant ways in our lives and the lives of those around us.

Puzzles piece in my hand – waiting for God to help me put the piece in place.

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