

DANE ORTLUND

SURPRISED

by

JESUS

Subversive Grace in the Four Gospels



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*For Dad,
who has convinced me of the truths of these pages
by word and, far more powerfully, by example.*

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PREFACE

THIS BOOK WAS birthed in a class taught on the four Gospels in the autumn of 2008 at Naperville Presbyterian Church and again, in a slightly different format, in 2009 at The Orchard Evangelical Free Church, both near Chicago, Illinois. I am indebted to the members of both classes for their enthusiasm and insights. The material has also been honed over the years through various other teaching and preaching opportunities, not least spending two weeks teaching the four Gospels at the Theological College of Central Africa in Ndola, Zambia.

This book was originally released under the title *Defiant Grace* in 2011; the present iteration, ten years on, retains much of the same material but it has been reworked and honed. It is a particular pleasure to me that the first venue of teaching this material, Naperville Presbyterian Church, is where I now serve, having been called to serve there pastorally in 2020.

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Noting the seedbed of these reflections helps to explain their intended audience, emerging as they have in the context of the local church. This book is not written for the academy, though I have benefited from numerous scholars whose names only rarely surface in these pages. Nor is it aimed at Christian leaders, though the debt I owe certain leaders in today's church is beyond repayment. It is written for fellow everyday believers, or those investigating what Jesus was really all about — anyone interested in listening afresh to the heart of Christianity by listening to Jesus. If you want nothing to do with Christians or the church but are intrigued by Jesus himself, this book is for you. If, on the other hand, you consider yourself a Christian yet obedience has somehow come to feel like a tax paid to God (with the hope that you will have enough left over to live on), this book is equally for you.

I happily and gratefully acknowledge those teachers of mine who have informed the theological and personal background from which this book has emerged — some dead, others living; some by their writing, others by their friendship. Readers familiar with the ministries of Martin Luther, Jonathan Edwards, Adolf Schlatter, C. S. Lewis, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Paul Tournier, Helmut Thielicke, Richard Bauckham, Brian Martin, and Ray Ortlund Jr. will gladly note the influence these gifts to the church have had on my own understanding of spiritual reality. This little book is theirs as much as mine. It is dedicated to the last-mentioned, my dad, who, in a hundred ways I recognize and

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a thousand I do not, has shown me the meaning and the beauty of the gospel.

I am grateful also to Brad Byrd and the team at 10Publishing.

Greater than my debt to any of these is that owed to my best friend and partner in life. Stacey not only read and improved every chapter, but continues to put up with and encourage me every day. For this and the countless other ways you brighten my life, thank you, sweetheart.

Dane Ortlund

Easter 2021

INTRODUCTION

JESUS IS SURPRISING. His coming fulfilled ancient prophecies, but not expectations. He shattered expectations.

Each of the four Gospel accounts in the Bible uniquely gives us a Jesus who turns upside down our intuitive anticipations of who he is and how following him works. Like a bad back that needs to return repeatedly to the chiropractor for straightening out, our understanding of Jesus needs to be straightened out over and over again as our poor spiritual posture throws our perception of him out of line — domesticating him and conforming him to our image, rather than transforming us into *his* image.

For the grace that comes to us in Jesus Christ is not measured. This grace refuses to allow itself to be tethered to our innate sense of fairness, reciprocity, and balancing of the scales. It is surprising.

Few have captured the surprise of grace better than the American Episcopalian priest and author Robert Farrar

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Capon in his description of what the Protestant Reformers recovered five centuries ago. Reflecting on why Martin Luther refused to endorse forced celibacy on the priests, Capon wrote:

The Reformation was a time when people went blind-staggering drunk because they had discovered, in the dusty basement of late medievalism, a whole cellarful of fifteen-hundred-year-old, 200-proof grace — of bottle after bottle of pure distillate of Scripture that would convince anyone that God saves us single-handed.¹

The Reformation's rediscovery of grace is a discovery that must take place afresh, in kind if not in degree, in each generation. The church is always only a few generations away from losing the gospel. D. A. Carson recounts a memory both fascinating and frightening:

I have heard a Mennonite leader assess his own movement in this way. One generation of Mennonites cherished the gospel and believed that the entailment of the gospel lay in certain social and political commitments. The next generation assumed the gospel and emphasized the social and political commitments. The present generation identifies itself

1. Robert Farrar Capon, *Between Noon and Three: Romance, Law, and the Outrage of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp.109-10.

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with the social and political commitments, while the gospel is variously confessed or disowned; it no longer lies at the heart of the belief system of some who call themselves Mennonites.²

The gospel was first cherished, then assumed, then lost. Such a process of spiritual devolution is not, of course, limited to a particular branch of the church. Left in neutral, all of us tend to slide away from the wonder of the gospel. My aim in this book is to help us cherish the gospel.

Easier said than done. However much we may pay tribute to grace with our lips, our hearts are so thoroughly marinated in law that the Christian life must be, at core, one of continually bathing our hearts and minds in gospel grace. We are addicted to law. Conforming our lives to a moral framework, playing by the rules, meeting a minimum standard — this feels normal. And it is how we naturally seek to cure that deep sense of inadequacy within. The real question is not how to avoid becoming a Pharisee; the question is how to recover from being the Pharisees that we all — right from the womb — already are.

Law feels safe; grace feels risky. Rule-keeping breeds a sense of manageability; grace feels like moral vertigo. After all, if all that we are is by grace, then there is no limit to what God can ask of us. But if some corner of our virtue is due to personal contribution, there is a ceiling on what God can ask of us. He can bring us only so far. He can ask only so much.

2. D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons From 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), p.63.

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Such is not the call of Christ. The Jesus of the Gospels defies our domesticated, play-by-the-rules morality. It was the most extravagant sinners of Jesus' day who received his most compassionate welcome; it was the most scrupulously law-abiding people who were the objects of his most searing denunciation. The point is not that we should therefore take up sin. It is that we should lay down the silly insistence on leveraging our sense of self-worth with an ongoing moral record. Better a life of sin with penitence than a life of obedience without it.

This book is a call to embrace the flooding liberations of the gospel *all the way down* — not the decaffeinated grace that pats us on the hand, ignores our deepest rebellions, and doesn't change us, but the high-octane grace that takes our conscience by the scruff of the neck and breathes new life into us with a pardon so scandalous that we cannot help but be changed. This book is a brotherly exhortation to blow aside the hazy cloud of condemnation that hangs over us throughout the day with the strong wind of gospel grace.

You 'are not under law but under grace' (Rom. 6:14). Jesus is real; grace is subversive; life is short; risk is good. For many of us the time has come to abandon once and for all our play-it-safe, toe-dabbling Christianity and dive in. It's time, as Capon put it, to get drunk on grace — two-hundred-proof, subversive grace. Jesus doesn't crowbar us into change. He surprises us into change.

This book exists to stoke the fires of grace renewal already spreading throughout the twenty-first-century church.

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Something of a resurgence of the gospel has been taking place today across various swathes of the Christian church. We must, of course, avoid facile generalizations. Yet it is evident from today's preaching and teaching, books and blogs, conferences and coalitions, that the gospel of grace is being wonderfully reasserted and cherished. Many have been walking with the Lord for years, yet are only now discovering the new mental and emotional universe of *grace*.

All this we happily receive from the hand of the Lord. The need of the hour, however, is neither self-congratulation nor smug diagnosis of who 'gets' the gospel of grace. The need of the hour is deeper reverence, new levels of wonder at the kindness shown to us, and a whispered prayer that the good news of God's free mercy in Christ would spread with a continued contagion with effects that will be felt for generations to come.

The spreading of that contagion is the reason for this book. *Surprised by Jesus* is divided into four parts, one on each Gospel's depiction of Jesus. Within each Gospel's treatment is a handful of short chapters. In Matthew, we see the surprise of disobedient obedience. Jesus' *definition of morality* is counterintuitive, contrary to all our expectations. Mark shows us the surprise of the king as a criminal. Jesus' *mission* is counterintuitive. In Luke, we are confronted with the surprise of outsiders becoming the insiders, and insiders, oddly, becoming the outsiders. Jesus' *community* is counterintuitive. And in John, we see the surprise of the Creator taking on flesh and blood as a creature. Jesus' *identity* is counterintuitive.

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In theological terms, our treatment of Matthew lies in the realm of morality, of Mark in atonement, of Luke in ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church), and of John in Christology. Time and again, our intuitive expectations of who Jesus is and what he has come to do are turned upside down — whom he excludes, what he came to do, whom he welcomes, and who he is. Such emphases are not mutually exclusive, of course. All four Gospel accounts teach us about all four of these theological areas. Still, for all their overlap, God has given us four accounts, not one. And in a way unique to each Gospel account, we see the perplexing compassion of Jesus confront our intuitive expectations about morality, atonement, ecclesiology, and Christology. The Jesus of the Gospels defies our safe, law-saturated, score-keeping existence.

Jesus is many things. But *predictable* is not on the list. He is not, in the words of Mr Beaver, ‘safe’.³ Startling, arresting, surprising, infuriating, perplexing, yes; but not bland and predictable. No sooner have we convinced ourselves that God is real and the Bible meaningful than Jesus, the real Jesus, arrives on the scene and turns all our intuitive expectations on their heads.

But though Jesus’ intuition-defying grace surprises us, our confusion does not surprise him. He knows all about it. And he is a patient teacher, more patient and tender than we have yet dared to believe.

So be surprised, with me, by the real Jesus.

3. C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: HarperCollins, 1978), p.86.