

Deliverance from the Unknown

Have You Ever Thought About What You Don't Know?

At the age of twenty the Lord called me into full-time Christian ministry. Wanting to be trained in whatever sort of service He might choose for me, I went to a small Christian university to study psychology from a Biblical perspective. I was single and was thrilled to discover that there were about four times as many female students there as were male students. I was, like most single men my age, interested in finding “the girl of my dreams” and so after about two months at the college, because I was popular, I was convinced I would end up marrying one of the girls there. I knew God had someone picked out for me at college. To my great shock, I graduated and was still single, not engaged or even having a girlfriend. When I moved on to seminary in New Orleans, the ratio of men to women was the exact opposite. There were far more single men than women on campus and it seemed as though I had no hope of finding someone I wanted to marry there. In fact, I started to think I would wind up single the rest of my life. I had lost my chance at being happily married when I left that little Baptist college without picking any of the Christian women there. The unknown is the source of many fears and much depression in the world. When we can't foresee the future and it even seems bleak, many lose their way. Our big idea for today is “Thank God He is in charge of the unknown”.

This past week the cruel and murderous regime of Bashar al Asad was toppled in Syria. Thousands of his own people were murdered by his forces in order to preserve his dictatorship and Syrians around the world are rejoicing that he fled to Russia in fear of the rebels who entered Damascus. There are many questions about how this shift in power will impact Iraq and Russia who supported Asad financially and militarily. What will this mean for Israel which borders Syria and how about Ukraine which is in a bitter fight for survival with Russia, Asad's ally? Will this impact oil prices? Will it affect world peace? What can we expect of those who will now be running Syria? Jesus told us that we are not to be afraid of times like this. **When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.** (Mark 13: 7 NIV) We live in a world of chaos and the Lord reassures us that chaos is not going away any time soon, particularly in the geopolitical realm. More importantly, our personal world is filled with chaos. We can never be certain of what will come next; there is far more unknown to your life than known and if you are one who likes to be filled in on what to expect and how to plan for what is ahead, it can be quite upsetting.

Honestly, doesn't your life at times feel a bit like what Hezekiah faced when Jerusalem was surrounded by the army of the most powerful and ruthless nation in the middle east and that army was bent on wiping out or making slaves of all the people of the city? The general of the Assyrian forces taunted Hezekiah and the Jews in Jerusalem, mocking their attempts at avoiding capture and death, threatening that soon they would have nothing to eat and would have to resort to drinking their own urine and eating their own excrement. What Hezekiah and the Jews faced was the very apex of chaos. The unknown was more a nightmare than a dream. Hope was stripped of all its goodness and promise. It is like that when you have an appointment with a cancer specialist, when you are called into the boss's office after others have just been let go, when you get notification of your grades and you felt you bombed your final, when one of your children come to you in a panic, when you are asked to give a speech at your dad's wedding ceremony, when you find out you have been drafted, when the bank is about to foreclose on your house. The future is not the friend of everyone, and for many, it is dreaded. Habakkuk well describes the physical response to an unknown future that has a high potential for calamity when he wrote as the Babylonian army invaded Judah. **I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled.** (Habakkuk 3: 16a NIV) Have you ever experienced something like that?

What can make the future even more confusing and disconcerting is the realization that forces are at work behind the scenes that you cannot factor into your planning process. Job was not aware the entire time he was going through his horrific suffering that Satan had a hand in what was happening. **So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. Then Job took a piece of broken pottery and scraped himself with it as he sat among the ashes.** (Job 2: 7-8 NIV) How can you plan for the future when the sheer irrational evil of Satan is involved and playing a part in what happens? You have no tools to cope with that variable and it is most dangerous to ignore the presence of Satan in your life. Didn't Jesus tell Peter that as Jesus was on the verge of His crucifixion that Satan would have a say in Peter's future? **"Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat."** (Luke 22 :31 NIV) What makes the unknown dark for you is that like Peter and Job, Satan plays a part in it and you cannot know what that means for you.

We are on the verge of Christmas and during this time we often explore the events leading up to the birth of Christ, but I want to go forward a bit and consider just how unknown the future was for Joseph and Mary and Jesus and by doing so, you can see how the unknown works in your favor. We can, with great certainty, assume that Joseph and Mary were quite poor. Otherwise, why would Mary have given birth to Jesus in a dingy stable and when born put Him in the feeding trough of the animals housed there? Clearly the young family did not have funds they could access if needed. They were destitute. The future is unknown to all of us but the volatility of what was coming for Jesus and His parents could not have been seen by them. Unbeknownst to them. Magi from far away, who studied the stars, noticed that a particular star suddenly appeared. **After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."** (Matthew 2: 1-2 NIV) Joseph and Mary would not have known these Magi had gone to King Herod and filled them in on the "king of the Jews" being born nearby. They would not have even realized how paranoid Herod was and what turmoil this prophecy would have caused him. When the Magi finally came to where Jesus and His family were staying, they worshipped Jesus and provided the family with luxurious gifts, extravagant gifts. Gold, frankincense and myrrh were not the sort of items the poor possessed. Gold seems like something quite valuable to an impoverished family. But burial spices and incense were of no use to them. Let this however sink in as you consider the unknown Jesus' family faced.

The entire time the Magi were celebrating the birth of the child they traveled hundreds of miles to see, Herod was making plans to make sure Jesus was killed and eliminate him as a threat to Herod's rule.. Herod had sneakily gotten the Magi to agree to return to him after they found the baby and let him know where he was staying. However, the Lord was two steps ahead of Herod and the unknown the Magi faced. God warned the Magi in a dream not to return to Herod, so they went back home a different way. **And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.** (Matthew 2: 12 NIV) Herod was not amused by the change of plans made by the Magi. **When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.** (Matthew 2: 16-17 NIV) Keep in mind that all of this was unknown to Joseph and Mary. They were not aware of Herod's plan and did not realize the great danger Jesus faced, as well as themselves. At this point Joseph and Mary would not have feared the unknown because they were not aware of the peril before them. The basis of understanding the true nature of our world is the recognition it is tragic. Death reigns in our universe and evil is in the hearts of every one of us. Jesus told us not to be surprised by wars and rumors of wars and that is just the very tip of the iceberg regarding the reach of death and inhumanity. The support of many for the murderer of the health care CEO has generated outrage but why should it? There is tremendous amounts of anger all around at the horrific ways people have been treated by those who should have loved and cared for them. The chaos Satan fuels is boundless, and we can never prepare adequately for the sort of evil Joseph and Mary and Jesus had lurking in the dark nearby. But I say this with great respect for the suffering of so many. God knows what is to come and He is in your favor, He has a plan for your good regardless of how bad it may seem.

The Lord did not just let evil have its way with Joseph and Mary and Jesus. He warned Joseph in a dream to escape Herod immediately. **When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."** (Matthew 2: 13 NIV) Despite the secret plans of Herod, God had a means of escape in place for the family of Jesus and He does for you too. Consider this. Those extravagant gifts, the ones that seemed useless and unnecessary for the impoverished family of Joseph and Mary and Jesus was the way God planned in advance for their escape and sanctuary. They would be sold to pay for their expenses in Egypt. Never think that the Lord does not have everything prepared and in place for you regardless of how dire the future may seem. Never fear the unknown because it is irrational to do so. Christ, who rules over the universe and beyond loves you and will provide for you so that you can live in peace and joy. Remember the example He gave of worrying about your clothing. **And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?** (Matthew 6 28-30 NIV) Our big idea for today is "Thank God He is in charge of the unknown". Never let fear decide how you will see things, but may it be faith in Christ that determines your take on what lies ahead. You are beloved of God and He will see you through whatever the future might bring.