

It's a Mystery!

The Spontaneous Work of the Spirit of God

by Steve Hixon

In the academy-award-winning movie Shakespeare in Love, the young bard spends months writing a play that will eventually become what we know as “Romeo and Juliet”. He pours his heart into the process for many reasons, primarily because it is autobiographical – he’s writing about his own relationship with a woman. But his reputation as a playwright is shaky to say the least, and as he anxiously awaits the first (and possibly last) performance, he nervously watches the cast going through their last-minute backstage preparations. The very first lines are to be spoken by a man who... stutters! The future of this play, and probably of Shakespeare’s career, depends upon a man who cannot utter the very first sentence. Over and over again he tries to say the word “two”, but he just can’t do it.

Demoralized and astonished at what seems to be inevitable disaster, Shakespeare hangs his head and laments to a friend, “We’re lost.”

But the friend, who is equally aware of the situation, says something strange: “No, it will go well.”

Taken back by this bizarre optimism, Shakespeare asks, with a look of disbelief, “Why is that?”

The friend replies, “I don’t know. It’s a mystery.”

And sure enough, the stuttering actor walks onstage (or to be more accurate, he’s pushed) and begins his stammering attempt at pronouncing one simple word. A hush falls over the crowd. A few begin to snicker. Those who predicted failure appear justified.

But suddenly, in what appears to be a miraculous transformation, the speaker not only says the word clearly and crisply, but he goes on to speak with a new confidence, enunciating with authority and depth and resonance, and in a moment the audience is transfixed.

Shakespeare is in shock, surprised by joy. Unbelievable! It might succeed, after all.

I love that.

I tried to figure out just what it was about that scene that struck such a chord in me, and it wasn’t until I read Jesus’ parable in Mark 4 that it clicked. What I love most about God is when He surprises me. Sometimes I look at a situation in my life and it looks impossible; I see the barriers and the downside and the improbability, and I want to give up.

That’s how Jonathan Edwards must’ve felt in 1734 in Northampton, Massachusetts. A young preacher, he struggled with the fact that the whole town was basically going to the dogs spiritually, and nothing he did seemed to make the slightest dent. No one cared about spiritual things, no one gave God the time of day. What’s the point of going on? But read the following words, written by Edwards just 6 months later...

“There is scarcely a single person in the town, young or old, who is unconcerned about the great things of the eternal world. Those who used to be vainest and loosest, are now generally subject to great awakenings. And the work of conversion is carried on in the most astonishing manner, and increasing more and more; souls are coming by flocks to Jesus Christ.”

Is this the same dejected man, the same pathetic community? What happened?

We don’t know; it’s a mystery.

Now, historians will tell you that this is what has come to be known as the Great Awakening, a time of unprecedented religious revival throughout colonial New England. It spread like wildfire along the Connecticut River valley, enlivening previously complacent towns and villages, bringing hundreds of men, women and children into a vibrant encounter with God. Lives changed, and they stayed changed; it wasn’t just a fad. But no one planned it, it wasn’t foreseen, and the principal players all stood amazed. Edwards even recorded what he

witnessed in a short book, which he called “A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God.” Why did it happen?

We don’t know, it’s a mystery.

OK, it’s not a total mystery. We know who did this. It’s God. But what’s mysterious about God is not His character (He’s revealed that in the Bible), or His overall plan for planet earth (He created and shepherded the nation Israel, He sent His Son to redeem the human race, He’s sending Jesus back someday to bring history to a close and usher in a new era of goodness and truth). But what we don’t know is exactly when or how He’ll do what he wants to do. That’s what makes knowing God such an adventure. He’ll let a situation sit there like He doesn’t even know it exists. And then just when you think it’s time to pull the plug, surprise! He changes it.

You write off some guy as a loser and a self-centered jerk, and then you run into him at your class reunion and Oh my God what’s happened? You’re standing there listening to him tell you how Jesus Christ miraculously changed his life, as you absent-mindedly drool into your Coke, dumbstruck.

You think your daughter is terribly, irretrievably lost. As you helplessly watch her young life spiral down the drain, you travel down the road of regret, looking under every rock of your memory, searching to figure out what you did wrong, certain it’s all your fault. And then one day, out of the blue, unsuspected, there’s a spark. It’s small, but it was there. You’re sure you saw it; an unmistakable sign of life. Fast forward – a year later. She’s healthy, she’s hopeful, she’s full of life. Her head is clear. Why? How?

I don’t know. It’s a mystery.

God’s been doing this sort of thing for some time now. It’s called the Kingdom of heaven. Jesus talked about it all the time. It was like he was trying to describe a foreign country to a bunch of people who’d never traveled outside their own little village. He used metaphors, stories, comparisons and contrasts, all in an attempt to get us to see that God is here with us, working in this world (after all, that’s what “Immanuel” means).

Take a moment to look at the book of Mark, chapter 4. There’s a small paragraph in the middle (verses 26-29) that’s easy to miss. It’s only four verses long. I missed it my whole life, to be honest. It never caught my eye until a few weeks ago. Background: Jesus has been talking about soil and seeds and farmers (I’d seen that part), and then he talks about mustard-seed faith (I’d heard about that, too). But sandwiched in between is this gem of truth that no other gospel writer bothered to mention. He says,

*"This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."*

That’s all there is! I used to read that and keep going. It’s like a hiccup in the middle of Jesus’ teaching. But take a closer look at what he says:

A farmer does his thing. He throws seeds on the ground. He goes to sleep. He doesn’t ... do ... anything ... else. He seems out of it, detached, ignorant, even impotent. But, like Jack and the Beanstalk, in the next frame he’s standing there awestruck by what has happened – the seed grew! It’s alive! Amazing! All he has to do now is go out and gather in the harvest. How did that happen?

He doesn’t know. It’s a mystery.

One day, the disciples are with Jesus and they’re tired, frankly. There are hundreds of people hanging around, it’s getting dark, and suddenly they realize, hey, we’re in deep trouble. These people aren’t even from around here, they’ve traveled a long way just to listen to Jesus and now ... where in the world are they going to sleep? Worst of all, they’ll probably look at us like we should help them out! There’s no Motel 6 here with the light on, there’s no soup kitchen for miles, there’s barely enough food for the twelve of us to have fish tacos. Get rid of them, Jesus!

*“Huh? What did He say? He wants us to feed them? That’s it; I’m outa here. He’s flipped for sure this time. I had a hunch He was close to the edge, and now He’s gone over.”*

[20 minutes later ten thousand people are eating dinner]

How in the world did that happen?

They don't know. It's a mystery.

What's the point Jesus was trying to make? I've thought about it for awhile, and I think it's this: Be active. Be involved. God wants to use you in this world, in His kingdom, for however many years you have left on this terminal planet. Work on your spiritual life. Use your gifts to love and serve people. BUT... don't ever confuse your role with His role. Don't ever assume that your efforts alone will produce miraculous change. After all, when we deal with human beings in the invisible realm of the spirit, we are treading on thin ice. We are over our heads, to use another picture. There is nothing I can do to affect another person in the realm of his or her spiritual life. It's beyond my understanding, my ability, my comprehension, my control.

But God can.

He wants to use me (think of the absurdity of that!), but sometimes I think of Him as an absentee landlord – that He's walked away, and when He gets back He's expecting big things. So I scurry around, feverishly doing whatever I can to produce some kind of a crop He'll be happy with.

And Jesus seems to be saying in this parable: "Wait a minute. Slow down. Are you thinking you're alone? I'm doing something here and I just want you to sit back and watch."

Just watch? As an American evangelical Christian in a hyper-activist culture, that's tough to do.

An old friend of mine used to sit down with her kids every so often and have what they called a "God – hunt". They would talk about their week and, like spiritual spies, see if they could "find" God in the unexpected places of their lives. They'd think a little while, and pretty soon one of them would make a discovery, a serendipity! (That's an old word for an unexpected surprise.) There He is! He was helping me with my homework, He was patching up a broken friendship, He was making our meager ends meet. The joy of discovery – it just doesn't get any better than that.

The famous Christian writer Francis Schaeffer told of a defining moment in his life and ministry. He was a young pastor in St. Louis, going through the motions of "churchianity"; working hard, but hardly enjoying it. One day he stopped in his tracks and asked himself, "What is there in my life that can't be thoroughly explained by human effort alone?" It became a nagging question he couldn't escape. He thought, "What if... what if the rest of my life and ministry were to be characterized by the unexplainable energy of the Holy Spirit?" Out of that struggle, L'Abri was born. Thousands of people around the world have been affected by that hard-to-describe ministry in the Swiss Alps. The Schaeffer kids began bringing home their school friends on holidays, and they would ask difficult questions about life and death and evolution and philosophy and epistemology and on and on. And Edith would brew pot after pot of tea and they would stay awake late into the night, listening like no one had ever listened before, and a steady stream of new-born followers of Jesus would find their ways back home or back to their schools, infiltrating their communities with the radical idea of a relationship with a living God who listened to them.

How did it happen? No one planned it, no one knows. It's a mystery.

Schaeffer used to say that one of modern man's biggest problems is that he believes in the "uniformity of natural causes in a closed system." That's a fancy way of stating that many people today assume that nothing can break into this universe; miracles, therefore, (by definition) can't happen. But, Schaeffer argued, most people will admit that we don't have exhaustive knowledge about the universe. So why can't we admit that there *might* be a God who created the very system we see? And if He created it, then He can change it. He can break in whenever He chooses.

Now, don't get me wrong; not all situations have happy endings. This is still a fallen world. The Kingdom of heaven is the now-and-the-not-yet. One woman is healed instantaneously, another takes three years and a series of operations, and a third sees her condition worsen, with no relief. Jesus never said that every situation would work out the way we'd like to see it. He himself was called the "a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief"; He wept when His one of own best friends (Lazarus) died. Sure, Jesus raised him from the dead, but then Lazarus had to die a second time. I think Jesus realizes that we tend to one of two extremes: either we give up on life out of discouragement, or we try to control life by frenetic activity. In this parable of the mysterious growing seed He's reminding us that He's here, and that He can do the impossible. We don't have to despair, and we don't have to try to manipulate.

As a young man I was an intern at a West-coast church for one summer. The staff, whom I watched like a hawk, kept repeating a phrase: “JSU.” After awhile I couldn’t take it any more; I just had to ask, “What in the world are you guys talking about? What’s this “JSU” thing?” One of them patiently explained, “It means Just Show Up. We found we were trying to plan too much, and we discovered we were planning God’s Spirit right out of our events, our counseling, our relationships. We saw that we need to relax and just show up. At first it was hard, because we felt unprepared, even a little guilty. But we soon began to see God use us in ways we’d never imagined, doing things that weren’t on our carefully planned agendas. So now we remind each other. We say, hey, JSU.”

Let me ask you one more question. Why do you think this parable is only mentioned in Mark’s gospel? Certainly others heard it, knew about it. It’s impossible to answer for sure, but let me hazard a guess. Which gospel writer was the biggest failure? Mark. Now, they all failed at times, but Mark’s blunder was especially wimp-like. He got tired and scared during the first missionary journey and basically just bailed out. He quit. He was labeled such a liability that the next time they were choosing-up “teams” to go out and Mark’s name was brought up, Paul said, “No way I’m taking that loser!” Fast-forward a decade or two. Mark – yes, the same Mark – has somehow become an extremely valuable resource in Paul’s eyes and has just finished writing the book that will be translated more than any book in history, the gospel of Mark. How did that happen? Where’s the formula for such a turn-around? It’s a mysterious combination of the Holy Spirit working in Mark’s heart, and a loving relative named Barnabas planting seeds in Mark’s life.

Last night Denver Broncos second-string quarterback Gus Frerotte threw four interceptions, got behind by 17 points late in the game and watched from the sidelines as hundreds of fans streamed out of the stadium, disgusted. Minutes later the faithful remnant of the Mile-High crowd stood in amazement as that same quarterback threw for team-record yardage and won the game by a single point! Asked afterwards if he’d ever thought of quitting, he said, “I never gave up. With the guys we have on this team, you never give up.”

Maybe what Jesus wants to say to you through this amazing gem of a parable is – don’t give up. Maybe you’re a parent who feels that whatever good seeds you’ve tried to plant in the lives of your children were long ago blown away by the chaotic winds of life. Maybe you’re serving a group of people in your church who don’t seem to respond to or care about one thing you do. Maybe you’re a Christian who “used to be” an enthusiastic follower of Jesus Christ, but hard times and multiple moral failures have convinced you that even He has finally given up on you.

Don’t give up. It will turn out well. Why? I don’t know.

It’s a mystery.