

WHAT SHOULD I FIND ASTONISHING?**PSALM 60**

In a few moments, you'll be invited to come forward and partake again of the Lord's Supper. Here's a question. Have you ever felt astonished by the Lord's Supper? What it says about God, about you, and about our relationship with Him? For that matter, when was the last time your heart and mind was shocked, boggled, bewildered, amazed or thoroughly astonished by encountering Almighty God at any time? You might answer, "Rick, I'm not sure - when it comes to God - if I've ever been astonished. Why should I find God – or a relationship with God – astonishing?"

Our final message in our summer series on several psalms focuses on Psalm 60. Let's read it right now. Look again at v. 3. "You have shown your people desperate times; you have given us wine that makes us stagger." (Ps. 60:3 NIV) I find the wording of the old King James Version of the same verse interesting. "Thou hast shewed thy people hard things: thou hast made us to drink the wine of astonishment." (KJV) "The wine of astonishment." I like that phrase. It's a compelling image – if there ever was one – for the Communion cup that we'll be receiving together in a few moments. The wine of astonishment. Whenever we gather around the Lord's Table, it's a fresh invitation to be thoroughly astonished again at who Jesus is and what He's done for us through His death and resurrection. This morning as we allow the Holy Spirit to prepare our hearts for receive Communion again, I invite you to recognize three reasons to be overwhelmingly bewildered, shocked, taken aback, amazed, and astonished. Let's drink the wine of astonishment together. First of all, let's...

BE ASTONISHED AT MY OWN SINFULNESS.

If you're not astonished by Communion, you don't yet understand what it represents. Getting appropriately astonished begins with the realization of how intensely God feels about your sin and mine. As human beings, we regularly excuse sin, minimize it, rationalize it, and try to cover it up. Yes, it was humanity's sin for which Jesus died on the cross. But that included all your sins and all my sins. Don't forget what you're admitting when you take the bread today, dip it into the cup, and partake of it. You're freely acknowledging that you're a sinner and that you're guilty of personal rebellion against God. You agree your own sin separated you from God and disrupted His gracious plan and purpose for your life. Every time we come to the Table, we allow God to astonish us again by how dangerous and deadly sin is and continues to be.

May God help us to be truly astonished by our own sin. It continues to be treacherous and deceptive for the most dedicated follower of Jesus. It's easy to see the ugliness of sin and its effects on people when we see or hear stories about different kinds of addiction or when someone oppresses or abuses someone else in some way. But are we apt to forget that pride can be the deadliest sin of all? And what about selfishness, stubborn unwillingness to forgive others, hidden lust, or anger? Unless and until you're astonished by your own sin, you never truly see it or understand it for what it is. Here's what God knows about your heart and mine, "The human heart is most deceitful and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?" (Jer. 17:9 NLT) God alone.

Do you know how an Eskimo used to trap and kill a wolf before guns? First, he coated his knife blade with animal blood and allowed it to freeze. Then he added another layer of blood and another layer – multiple layers of blood – until the blade was completely concealed by frozen blood. Next, the Eskimo hunter fixed his knife in the ground with the blade pointed up. A wolf has a very acute sense of smell. Before long he discovered the knife coated with frozen blood. He licked it. He licked it again. Again and again, the wolf licked until the sharp edge of the knife was laid bare. Harder and harder the wolf licked the blade. Can you imagine what happened? So great was his craving for blood that the wolf didn't notice when the blade cut his own tongue. His thirst for blood was so insatiable, he didn't realize his lust was being satisfied by his own blood. He eventually bled to death there in the snow. That's what sin does to you and me eventually. We satisfy its desires at the expense of our own souls.

An ugly story, yes? Maybe even astonishing. Our sin – and how easily we fall into sin – ought to astonish us. The cross of Jesus ought to astonish us. Jesus' cross is the greatest single witness to the ongoing danger of my sin. When you meditate and reflect on what Jesus allowed to be done to Him, it becomes harder to minimize our sin and remain blissfully self-righteous. "I'm not so bad!" Really? Don't confuse the actual crucifixion of Jesus nearly 2,000 years ago with our worship experience this morning. Everything here is so clean, bright, pleasant, and antiseptic. Jesus' body wasn't freshly baked, sweet smelling bread. It was broken human flesh terribly lacerated and bruised. Jesus' blood wasn't pasteurized, recently bottled grape juice obtained at a grocery store. It was His very life being poured out because your sin and mine demanded it. When you come forward today, ask God to astonish you. Ask Him to give you just a glimpse of your sin – or your capacity to sin. Allow yourself to be astonished. It's no wonder Jesus said, "Do this – Communion – in remembrance of Me." We forget so easily. But there's a second kind of astonishment that should happen at the Table.

BE ASTONISHED AT GOD'S SALVATION.

The Gospels are full of stories of how Jesus astonished people. They were astonished by both His miracles and His words. The religious leaders like the Pharisees got astonished negatively by Jesus' claims and His wisdom all the time. Perhaps Mark summed it up best when he said this about Jesus, "People were overwhelmed with amazement..." (Mk. 7:37 NIV) Apparently, when you encountered the literal, flesh and blood Jesus you got challenged at every level – your mind, your heart, your soul. Astonished. When you come to the Lord's Table, it's yet another opportunity for you to get astonished at the power and magnitude of God's salvation. In our psalm today, David said, "Now rescue your beloved people. Answer and save us by your power." (Ps. 60:5 NLT) Communion is this powerful and continual reminder of what God did to rescue the people He loved – what He did to save us by His power.

The Bible makes it very clear that our situation demanded outside intervention. We could not and cannot save ourselves. It says, "For the sinful nature is always hostile to God. It never did obey God's laws, and it never will. That's why those who are still under the control of their sinful nature can never please God." (Rom. 8:7-8 NLT) Sin is

a force that enslaves us and holds us in a kind of spiritual bondage. It's far bigger and more powerful than you and me. If we refuse to bring our sin issue to God for resolution, we literally chose our own demise. The Bible says, "But God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who push the truth away from themselves.... For the wages of sin is death." (Rom. 1:18, 6:23 NLT)

After painting that very grim picture, the Bible tells us God intervened and provided salvation through Jesus. "For God sent Jesus to take the punishment for our sins and to satisfy God's anger against us. We are made right with God when we believe that Jesus shed his blood, sacrificing his life for us.... He is being entirely fair and just in this present time when he declares sinners to be right in his sight because they believe in Jesus." (Rom. 3:25-26 NLT) That's an astonishing message. Your sins and mine couldn't just be overlooked. God never swept them under some rug and pretended they didn't matter. Justice had to be done to them. God Himself intervened by offering His own Son's life as payment for your sins and mine. It's wrong to see Jesus as a victim. Yes, His crucifixion was a terrible crime committed by godless men. But always remember God ultimately allowed His own Son to be put to death on the cross. It was the only way your salvation and mine could happen. Justice was done to our sin. We were given the opportunity to escape eternal damnation. We were given the opportunity to enter into an eternal love relationship with the God of the universe. Astonishing.

Are you astonished at God's salvation? Perhaps just as astonishing as what God did at the cross and the empty tomb of Jesus is what He continues to make available to you and me. "Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of highest privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory." (Rom. 5:1-2 NLT) There was a time when we were in conflict with God. Now, we have peace with Him. There was a time when we were headed straight to Hell. Now, we look forward to the eternal reality of Heaven. There was a time when we tried to make ourselves acceptable to God through our own pathetic efforts to be good. Now, we're declared right in His eyes forever and accepted by Him eternally. Does it sound too good to be true? Not if we understand what your salvation and mine cost God Himself.

Campbell Morgan, a well-known pastor from another generation, once had a conversation with a coal miner. The miner wanted to become a follower of Jesus, but it just sounded too good to be true. Too easy. Too effortless on our part. He thought salvation should cost Him something. He said, "I'd give anything to believe God would forgive my sins, but I cannot believe He will forgive me if I just turn to Him by faith." Morgan asked the miner, "Have you been working today?" The miner was surprised by the question, but he said, "Yes, I was in the mine today as usual." Morgan asked, "How did you get out of the mine?" The miner answered, "The same way I normally do. I got into the elevator and was pulled to the top." Morgan asked, "Well, how much did you pay to get pulled out of the mine?" "Pay?" said the miner. "I didn't pay anything, of course." Morgan continued, "Were you afraid to trust in that elevator? Was it too cheap?" The miner responded, "No. It was cheap for me – free, in fact - but the mining

company paid a great deal of money for that elevator and the equipment to pull me up and out of the mine.” Realizing what he’d just said, he was finally able to grasp the truth and necessity of God’s free salvation. It cost God a great deal, but it cost us nothing. Astonishing. The Lord’s Supper provides a final reason to be astonished.

BE ASTONISHED AT GOD’S PROVIDENCE.

We don’t use the word “providence” anymore. But it describes something wonderful and true about God. The dictionary says providence is all about God’s ability to provide wise, kind care and guidance for human beings. One well-known verse in the Bible might be the perfect definition of providence. “And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.” (Rom. 8:28 NLT) God is able to use anything and everything to bring glory to Himself and to benefit us in some eternal way. That’s His providence. And the longer you follow Jesus faithfully, the more you will be astonished by God’s providence – by His ability to use even the bad stuff that comes into your life to do something good and beneficial.

That’s what was happening in Psalm 60. David’s enemies had scored some impressive military victories against him. Frankly, he was astonished by their unexpected success. “You have rejected us, O God, and broken our defenses. You have been angry with us; now restore us to your favor. You have shaken our land and split it open.... You have been very hard on us, making us drink wine that sent us reeling.” (Ps. 60:1-3 NLT) David was shocked and bewildered by these military defeats. God had certainly got David’s attention. God had made him drink “the wine of astonishment” and he was staggering around like a drunken man. It was neither comfortable nor pleasant, but David had come face to face with his own limitations as well as his utter dependency on God’s power and presence. That realization was a good one. It was providential.

That realization should happen to you and me, too. Have you had any events in your life that made you stagger? That confused, bewildered, shocked, and astonished you? Of course, you have. What makes David’s relationship with God so compelling and interesting to you and me? David didn’t have a peaceful life. He didn’t have a sinless life. But, David was always on the lookout for God in all the events of his life – the good ones and the bad ones. He found God in his own personal failures. He found God in his defeats, in his struggles, and in his times of testing and trial. Through it all, David never lost the capacity to be thoroughly astonished at God’s providence in his own life.

So what did David learn from this season of defeat in his life? “Oh, please help us against our enemies, for all human help is useless. With God’s help we will do mighty things, for he will trample down our foes.” (Ps. 60:11-12 NLT) Like David, have you learned that when you face your enemies in life – whatever they might be – God’s help is absolutely necessary? If so, that’s a good, powerful lesson. That’s providential. Like David, have you learned that when you call upon the Lord, He does show up and rescue you eventually? He helps you defeat your enemies. If so, that’s a good, powerful lesson. That’s providential. So, then, the Lord’s Table provides the

opportunity to get astonished all over again at how God does what He does. How He uses and works in and through both the bad and the good in our lives. Why, the cross itself is the very best example of that truth. What was the worst possible experience for Jesus at the time it happened has turned out to be the best possible outcome both for Jesus and for us! The cross is the greatest demonstration of God's providence. The Lord's Table is this perpetual reminder to you and me that God is present and powerful no matter how difficult and bleak your life and mine might look like at the moment. God is sovereign. God is in control. God is working out His good purposes in our lives.

Providence simply means God shows up in our lives regularly and often. He shows up even in our deepest problems and when we least expect Him. Don't give up on God. Don't get all bitter that He doesn't do things in your way or in your time. Keep on trusting Him. Keep on being obedient to Him. Keep on being faithful to Him. Keep on looking for Him and talking to Him like David did. Here's what I know. One day you will get astonished again at His mercy, His grace, His love, and how He works out all things in your life to bring glory to Himself and good things for you. The Lord's Supper is an opportunity to get astonished at God all over again – how your past has been forgiven by Him, how His power and grace is showing up in your life today, and how your eternal future in Heaven is safe and secure because it is the Lord God Almighty who cares and watches over you – providentially.

Have you ever heard of the suicidal hymn writer? That would be William Cowper. He was a gifted poet and a dear friend of John Newton, the man who wrote the hymn "Amazing Grace." How should you feel about a Christian artist who was plagued with mental illness all of his life? Well, that was William Cowper. After trying to commit suicide three times and spending 18 months in an asylum, he became a follower of Jesus while reading Romans in the Bible. But the mental illness never disappeared. John Newton kind of adopted Cowper and urged him to serve the poor probably in an effort to take Cowper's mind off his depressions, poor health, paranoia, and fears of damnation. He also convinced Cowper to write hymns. He wrote 68 hymns. We have a few of his hymns in our hymnal. Probably the one we all know best is "There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Emmanuel's veins."

But the story behind another of Cowper's hymns is compelling. The year was 1772 and it was a foggy night in London, England. William Cowper gazed into his fireplace gripped once again by terrible discouragement and fear. Finally, he threw on his coat and walked out into the night. The fog was so thick he had to feel his way around the corner to where he knew a horse drawn carriage would be waiting. He ordered the driver, "Take me to the river, sir!" His deep depression had convinced him to jump off the bridge to his death. The trip should only have taken 15 minutes. But after 90 minutes of trying to navigate through those dark, foggy streets, the driver told Cowper he was hopelessly lost. Cowper paid his fare and decided he'd walk to the bridge instead. When he got out of the carriage, his arm struck a familiar object. It was the hitching post where he'd first caught the carriage. After 90 minutes of wandering around lost, he was right back almost at his own doorstep.

William Cowper was so astonished by this turn of events that he climbed the steps up to his apartment, lit an oil lamp, and knelt to ask God to forgive him for his suicidal thoughts. And then, right there in that same room that had gripped him with such great depression and discouragement, he wrote the words of a hymn that Christians have sung for about 250 years. It's really an anthem about God's astonishing providence.

God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform;
 He plants His footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm.
 You fearful saints, fresh courage take; the clouds you so much dread
 Are big with mercy and shall break in blessings on your head.
 His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding every hour;
 The bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower.
 Blind unbelief is sure to err and scan His work in vain:
 God is His own interpreter, and He will make it plain.

This morning I invite you again to come to the Lord's Table. I invite you to be astonished. Be astonished at your own sinfulness. Be astonished at God's salvation. And be astonished at God's providence. Come, eat the bread and – in David's words - drink the wine of astonishment.