GOD WORKS IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS?
Isaiah 55:6-9

The world is fascinated with mysteries. Whether it’s the old Time-Life book series, Robert Stack and his show, Unsolved Mysteries, or even the ghost of the headless hobo who swings a lantern on the railroad tracks outside of Gurdon, life certainly has its mysteries. And while I kind of wish I could say that if you just dial 1-800-B-I-B-L-E you’ll get all the answers you want, I can’t say that. When you dive into the pages of the Scripture you find this mysterious God who often works in mysterious ways.

As we continue our series, Is That Really in the Bible, I invite you to open your Bible to Isaiah 55:6-9,

There’s an old riddle. Maybe you’ve heard it: “What’s the difference between you and God? God never thinks He’s you.” And why would He? God is large and we are small. God is holy and we are sinners. God is strong and we are weak. God knows all there is to know about everything, and we know so very little about most things. We tend to be creatures of habit, our ways fairly predictable to those who know us best. But God? God works in mysterious ways. God is constantly surprising us, constantly showing up in places we’d least expect, and constantly twisting things toward good in ways we would have never imagined.

Just this week I heard Josh Adair, the youth pastor at Mt. Carmel Baptist in Cabot, tell about a recent mission trip to Haiti. The mission group was playing with some Haitian children using Slip Discs, Frisbees with the gospel printed on the underside in the Haitian’s heart language. A missioner let a Frisbee fly. The wind caught it, it overflew the kids with whom they were playing, and it landed in another group of rough looking young people. A guy on a motorcycle picked up the Frisbee and rode off, waving it at the group as if to say, “Na-na-na-na-na-na! I got your Frisbee.” Young Haitian men like the motorcycle rider typically can’t read, so the gospel message on the Frisbee would be unintelligible to him—thus, a wasted Frisbee. The local contact told Josh, “You’ll never see that Frisbee again.” But a few minutes later, the motorcycle man came roaring up to the team. He said, “I read the Frisbee, and I need to be saved.” The young man turned from his sins to Christ on the spot and immediately rode off and told four of his friend. They were also saved on the spot. And months later, Josh said that all four are still growing and active in the church. God works in mysterious ways.
And how many times have you seen God take unwanted, mysterious suffering or troubles in a person’s life and over time knit the threads of it into something good, something purposeful, something beautiful? You’ve heard Romans 8:28, right? “And we know that God works for good in all circumstance for those he loves, for those called according to his purpose.” So trouble came to you or someone you love. Maybe it was trouble a person brought on himself, maybe it was right out of the blue. You didn’t see what good could possibly come of such hardship, of such evil, and yet somehow, some way, over a period of time, God pulls it off. God redeems it. God Romans 8:28s it. And what can we say to that except this: “God works in mysterious ways.”

We Christians say that a lot. But did you know that those who don’t know Christ think we Christians use that phrase as a cop-out. Atheists are especially caustic about the way we believers throw that phrase around. I like the way Mark Chandler describes the atheist: “God doesn’t exist and I hate him!” Well, most of them do hate the way Christians drop the phrase, “God works in mysterious ways.” In preparing for this sermon, I read a blog post written by a person who calls herself Lady Atheist. She posted about the rescue of those three girls in Cleveland earlier this year. It really ticked her off that the aunt of one of those girls, in rejoicing over their rescue, described the way the rescue unfolded with the phrase, “God works in mysterious ways.” Lady Atheist made hay with that comment. “Really?” she asks. Why didn’t God keep the girls from being raped? Why did God allow them to be in captivity for so long? Why didn’t God give their kidnapper ALS or something else along the way so it would have been impossible for him to do this in the first place? If this God is good, why allow any of this to happen at all? So she says it is “just unbelievable” to look at that situation and cop-out of the tough questions by falling back on the well-worn phrase, “God works in mysterious ways.”

The phrase has its critics. Some use it sarcastically. They say, “God works in mysterious ways,” while rolling their eyes and shaking their head.

Others see the phrase as synonymous with another little saying we hear a lot: “Every cloud has a silver lining.” It’s a way of trying to say that even

1 http://ladyatheist.blogspot.com/2013/05/god-works-in-mysterious-ways-seriously.html
though a situation looks really lousy on the surface, maybe something good will come of it someday, maybe there’s a blessing in it someplace.

And still others use it as a way to shut down conversation, a way to circumvent thinking things through and talking things out. When a conversation about such things gets uncomfortable some of us are quick to shrug our shoulders and say, “Well, God works in mysterious ways.” The phrase functions as a period on a conversation.

The phrase takes a lot of abuse as you can see. Many believers, though, say it with sincerity, use it as an expression that honors the mystery of a God who is larger than we are, a God who sometimes gives blessings in disguise, a God who can twist even evil for some good end along the way. “God works in mysterious ways.”

Most of us who know God believe that to be true because we’ve seen it over and over again. But is that saying really in the Bible? Let’s see. Hear the word of the Lord through Isaiah the prophet … (read the text).

I

Hmm—God’s ways and thoughts are higher than our ways and thoughts. And not just higher as in Shaquille O’Neal to Mickey Rooney or as in Mt. Everest to Pike’s Peak, but higher as in the sun to the earth, the sun to that ice-chunk Pluto, the farthest reaches of the universe to Hot Springs, Arkansas. Higher as in we human beings will never be able to think most of God’s thoughts or act in most of God’s ways—the brilliant Albert Einstein, an imbecile next to God; the world’s strongest man, a 97-pound weakling next to God. God’s ways and thoughts are so much, much, much higher than our ways and thoughts. Do you hear the mystery in this?

And yet, in spite of the mystery, Isaiah tells us in vv. 6-7, that we can still know God: “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near.” God calls upon the wicked to turn from their wicked ways and unrighteous thoughts and return to the Lord who is ready to pour out compassion and pardon. This mysterious God, says Isaiah, makes himself known to us, even to the most wicked among us. That may be the greatest mystery of all.
And Isaiah is not the only writer in the Bible who tips his hat to the mystery that is God:

**Deuteronomy 29:29** — “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.” Do you hear what this is saying? All we can know of God is what God chooses to reveal of himself to us. And God does put some of the cookies on the lower shelf so we can know Him and know what He expects of His children. But we will never know God fully—“the secret things” belong to God alone. Mystery.

**In the 77th Psalm,** the psalmist declares, “You are the God who works wonders; you have made known your might among the peoples. You with your arm redeemed your people…” (77:14-15). God works wonders all right. Look at creation: how the earth’s tilt on its axis is such that if it were less than a degree either way, life couldn’t be sustained on our planet; or how an ugly, creepy, crawly caterpillar becomes a beautiful, multi-colored butterfly; and who would have ever thought up a duck-billed platypus except for God. God works wonders in creation. And the psalmist declares that God works wonders in redemption. The psalmist is astounded and finds it a great wonder that God would redeem his people. Instead of turning His back on the people who turned their backs on Him, God turns toward them, reaching out to them, willing to redeem, forgive, restore. Mystery.

**And then Paul gets in the act in Romans 11:33.** After writing of God’s mysterious ways in dealing with His people and with the Gentiles, Paul declares, “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” Mystery.

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**II**

**So is the actual phrase, “God works in mysterious ways,” in the Bible or not?** Well, those exact words are not in the Bible, but the principle surely is. The phrase itself is adapted from a hymn by William Cowper. Cowper lived in England in the 18th century. His was not a happy life: his mother died when he was six; he had a troubled relationship with his father. Cowper the boy struggled with depression and grew into Cowper the man who
struggled with depression. He was converted as an adult, convinced of the sovereignty of God and the sufficiency of Christ for salvation. Still, even after his conversion he struggled with depression and reclusiveness. John Newton, the pastor who wrote *Amazing Grace*, befriended Cowper and tried to help him. They took long walks together. Thinking that tapping Cowper’s poetic side might help him overcome his melancholy, Newton suggested the two of them collaborate on a book of hymns. Cowper wrote some hymns you know. One of his most famous is “There Is a fountain filled with blood / drawn from Immanuel’s veins / And sinners plunged beneath that flood / lose all their guilty stains.”

Cowper also wrote the hymn from which our phrase entered our lexicon of proverbial sayings. There’s a backstory that circulates about this hymn. Cowper often struggled with depression and doubt. One night he decided to commit suicide by drowning himself. He called a cab and told the driver to take him to the Thames River. But thick fog came down and prevented them from finding the river. After driving around lost for a while, the cabby finally stopped and let Cowper out. To Cowper’s surprise, he found himself on his own doorstep. He surmised that God had sent the fog to keep him from killing himself. Even in our bleakest moments, he concluded, God watches over us. So he quickly grabbed quill and ink and paper and wrote the words to this hymn:

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God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
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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.

It’s a great hymn and a great backstory. The problem is: in spite of its long history, no one can substantiate the backstory. So not only does God work in mysterious ways, whoever came up with the backstory worked in a mysterious way as well.

But an apocryphal backstory doesn’t rob the hymn of its beauty and its meaning and its truth: God works in mysterious ways.

III

And why wouldn’t He? God is God. God speaks whole worlds into existence. God is holy and large and pure and vast and majestic and glorious. God is so full of light He makes a halogen headlight look like a candle. To God the oceans are as puddles and the mountains are as plains. God is so large that He can spin a planet on His finger, fluff the skies like a blanket, scatter stars like glitter from a tube, and if God wanted to, He could blow it all away with one puff of His breath.

God is God. God covered the earth with plants of every kind; filled the seas with fish too numerous to count; set birds to flight, made animals to walk the face of the earth, and last and best of all made man and woman in His own image, fashioned us from the dust of the earth and breathed into us the breath that made us living souls—wiser, higher, better than everything else in all creation, but not wiser, higher, or better than God.

God is God. God makes something out of nothing, brings order to the universe, holds it all together in Jesus Christ, and will one day restore all creation to the pristine condition in which He first made it.

Though we formulate theories as to how all this came to be, though we do our best to suck the mystery out of all that God has done, our theories are
full of holes, our attempts to offer only naturalistic answers and erase God out of the equation are like trying to kill an elephant with a flyswatter. How can DNA be an accident? How can the tilt of the earth’s axis be pure chance? How can the order of the universe be random and without any intelligent designer? We can swing away at God all we want and yet honest minds are still left scratching their heads and puzzling over this wonderful creation God has mysteriously set in place.

Harry Emerson Fosdick writes about the astronomer who remarked, coming from a session with his telescope, “This does away with a six-foot god; you cannot shake hands with the Creator of this.” Yes it does do away with some pipsqueak God. There are still questions that defy any answer other than God. And no matter how hard some try to admit it, the words still come, “God works in mysterious ways.”

IV

And perhaps nothing is more mysterious than the fact that God desires to save us from our sins and make sons and daughters of us all—of us—sinners one and all.

• “There are none righteous,” says the Scripture (Rom. 3:11). “I will make them righteous,” says God.

• “There are none who seek God,” says the Scripture (Rom. 3:11). “I will seek them,” says the Lord.

• “There is none who does good,” says the Scripture (Rom. 3:12). “I will do good to them,” says God.

And on a dark Bethlehem night, God sent His Son Jesus to be born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who are under the law (Gal. 4:7). Jesus was born the God-Man (fully God, fully man)—“The Word became flesh and dwelled among us, and we beheld his glory as of the only begotten of the Father full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:14). Jesus grew up in a common home. Like you and me, He had to learn to walk and talk and go to the bathroom.

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without a diaper. Jesus grew up. Along the way, though tempted in all ways just as we are, Jesus never sinned.

And when He was about 30 years old, He began His public ministry. He opened eyes that had never seen a sunset or another face or the color blue. He opened ears that had never heard the sound of bird song or a mama’s lullaby. He cast out demons that had enslaved and abused men and women and children—demons that laugh at us but trembled at Jesus’ voice and ran for their lives at His command. When men could only curse a storm, Jesus could still it. When men could only sink in water, Jesus could walk it. When a sack lunch could barely feed one hungry mouth, Jesus could multiply it and feed a multitude of mouths. And when all people could do was mourn their dead, Jesus could raise them back to life.

But miracles and profound teaching was not enough to save us. Our sin is too great. God is too holy. Something had to be done, something radical, something sacrificial, something covered in blood and ended in death. So Jesus took up the cross in our behalf. And because He knew no sin, He could become sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God. And yet, if death could keep Him in the grave, then Jesus was at best just another martyr in a long line of other martyrs who died for a cause. But the grave couldn’t keep Jesus. On the third day, Jesus rose from the dead. He came out of that grave alive and well and victor over sin and Satan, over death and the grave. And what Jesus did in the cross and resurrection makes it possible for us to enter into relationship with God.

And part of the mystery of this is that God doesn’t expect us to earn our way into His good graces. There’s nothing mysterious about earning salvation: do this, don’t do that, follow these rules, perform these practices, avoid these sins, and you’re in. Do your job, get your pay. Nothing mysterious about that. It’s simple mathematics: \( x = y \). But the fact that God graces us into a relationship with Him is mystery indeed. We enter that relationship through Jesus, by trusting that what Jesus did on the cross He did for us. “To as many as received Jesus, to them he gave the power to become the children of God” (Jn. 1:12). That’s not mathematics. That’s not tit for tat. That’s not you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours. That’s sheer grace, amazing, astonishing, mysterious grace—the kind of thing that makes you think twice, “What? Me? Really?” Confounding, isn’t it? Mysterious.
We wouldn’t **seek God**, so in Christ God came to seek and to save the lost like us.

We couldn’t **do good**, so in Christ God has done good to us by making a way for our salvation and for our righteousness.

And the fact that God loves us so and gave His Son for our salvation is a mystery I will **never comprehend**. It leaves me scratching my head. It stirs in me to wonder and awe. It overwhelms me with a mystery I cannot solve and can only believe and receive and find life. I feel as astonished about this as the **apostle John** did when, overwhelmed and amazed by God’s love, wrote, “**How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God.**” And as if he knows how incredible all this must sound, he adds an extra phrase, “**And that is what we are!**” (1 Jn. 3:1). I can just see John, writing that in the flickering candlelight, suddenly toss his pen in the air, rock back in his chair, and shake his head at the wonder of it all.

It’s a mystery. Peter tells us even **the angels** don’t get it and long to understand it (1 Pet. 1:12).

**V**

**As God tells us in our Isaiah text, God’s ways and thoughts are so much higher than our ways and thoughts, and yet God still makes a way for us to know Him.** If we will turn to Him in repentance, this great and mysterious God will have compassion on the likes of us and abundantly pardon our sins. God works in mysterious ways.

Writer **Anne Lamott** says that when her son Sam was six or so, he explained to her why we call God “God”: “**Because when you see something so great, you just go ‘God!’**”

What can we say to the majesty and mystery of creation? “**God!**”

What can we say to the glory and mystery of our salvation? “**God!**”

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What can we say to the mystery of how the death of Jesus becomes life for us, the mystery of how even out of our hardships comes something good and beautiful and amazing? “God!”

Because when you see something so great, so large, so majestic, so mysterious, you just go “God!”

Praise be to God ... who works in mysterious ways!

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