

THE MYSTERY OF GOD'S WILL

STUDY NINE

Surprised by God

Selected Scriptures

Have you ever been surprised—really surprised—with the will of God for your life? You thought one way, and it turned out to be another. Talk about unfathomable, unsearchable, infinite, surprising.
—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

IN the mystery of God's will, the road of life sometimes takes an unexpected turn. Up to that point, we felt confident we were following God's plan. We applied the principles for discerning His will—we searched God's Word, we sought wise counsel, we sensed the Spirit's prompting, and we prayed and felt His peace. We thought we were headed in the right direction when, suddenly, everything changed.

Perhaps something like this happened to you. You felt certain that God led you to take a new job and to relocate. You thought the job was a perfect fit, but it turned out nothing like you expected. You feel like a fish out of water in the new city, and you wish you'd never left home.

Missionaries experience surprises too. Hearing the call of God, they sell everything to minister in a foreign country. But, after laboring for years, their work for God bears no fruit at all.

Or, ever hear of this happening to a couple in midlife? When the last of their adult children moves out, they settle into their long-awaited empty nest . . . only to discover they're expecting a baby. Surprise!

The examples of unexpected turns could go on and on. Surprises in God's will can cause us to shake our heads in amazement and disbelief. Sometimes, they bring a flood of tears, particularly when the surprise is the death of a loved one.

Are these surprises really from God? We know that God is good, but how do we interpret these unforeseen turns? In this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study, we'll explore the side of God's mysterious will that is inexplicable, confounding, and mind-boggling.



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Selected Scriptures



PREPARE YOUR HEART

As you prepare your heart to engage His Word today, join the psalmist David in reflecting on God's glory and unexpected ways, and offer this prayer to God from Psalm 8:1, 3–6, 9.

*O LORD, our Lord, your majestic name fills the earth!
Your glory is higher than the heavens. . . .
When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers—
the moon and the stars you set in place—
what are mere mortals that you should think about them,
human beings that you should think about them?
Yet you made them only a little lower than God
and crowned them with glory and honor.
You gave them charge of everything you made,
putting all things under their authority. . . .
O LORD, our Lord, your majestic name fills the earth!*



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Life's surprises can seem random, as if life is a just game of chance. When the unexpected happens, we might be tempted to think that God isn't aware or doesn't care—that He's too busy dealing with major world events to concern Himself with our little lives.

But consider these Scriptures: [Job 28:24](#); [31:4](#); [Psalm 139:3](#); [Proverbs 5:21](#). What is the theme, and what do they inform us about God's ways?

Many of God's people in Scriptures experienced the unexpected. It appears that surprises are part of God's plan. Let's examine them in the lives of Abraham, David, and Joseph and learn from their examples the purpose and value of God's surprises.¹



Observation: Postponements and Painful Paths

When surprises from God arrive strangely packaged, we are reminded of Romans 11:33:

Oh, the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! (NASB)

God's ways are unfathomable, which Abraham learned when the Lord asked Him to do something he never expected.

Surprised by God

Selected Scriptures

Abraham's Surprise: A Domestic Crisis

Abraham was a patriarch, known as the “father of many nations.” God established and reaffirmed a covenant with Abraham. In the chart below, *review* the Old Testament Scriptures and *record* God’s promises to Abraham and Abraham’s response.

OT Scripture	God’s Promises	Abraham’s Response
<i>Genesis 12:1–8</i>		
<i>Genesis 13:14–18</i>		
<i>Genesis 15:1–18</i>		
<i>Genesis 17:1–14</i>		

Read *Genesis 22:1–13*. Focus on *22:1–2* and record your thoughts and emotions as you reflect on what God asked Abraham to do.

What strikes you about Abraham’s response to God’s command in *22:3*?

Meditate on *22:7–8*, noting your thoughts about Abraham’s exchange with Isaac.

Surprised by God

Selected Scriptures

Ponder [Genesis 22:9–10](#), as it records the gripping and presumed final moments of Isaac's life. Jot down your impressions.

As you reach [22:11–13](#), record your emotions.

Joseph's Surprise: A Lifestyle Crisis

God's surprises touched Joseph's life as well. Read [Genesis 37:1–11](#) for context. What had God revealed to Joseph?

Joseph, however, never dreamed what would happen next. He was cast into a pit and sold into slavery by his brothers, deported to Egypt, falsely accused of rape by Potiphar's wife, sentenced to prison. Not the predictable lifestyle path we might imagine for the future Egyptian prime minister.

Eventually, God put him in a position to save his family from famine, but his circuitous route to blessing and leadership was *surprising*.

David's Surprise: A Career Crisis

David also experienced a surprise from God. Read [1 Samuel 16:1–13](#) for context. Focus on [16:7](#), recording your observations about the contrast between humanity's ways and God's ways of discerning leadership.

Surprised by God

Selected Scriptures

After Israel's King Saul had disqualified himself as leader through rebellious behavior, David was anointed by Samuel as the next king (1 Samuel 16:13). What a surprise! However, David's course proved bumpy and painful. He slew the menacing Goliath, but an insecure Saul murderously pursued him for years, with David taking flight and eking out an existence in the Judean wilderness. As with Joseph, his path to royalty was just as *surprising* as David's anointing.

In the mystery of God's will, you will come to a place where you cannot explain why things turned out like they did, and you are right in the middle of His will. It's not that you created a problem, it's that God is in the process of surprising His people on a regular basis. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: Postponement and Pain Is Preparatory

When interpreting a passage, consider what the passage *means*. Let's dig more deeply into each man's account.

Abraham

Return to [Genesis 22:1–13](#). Zeroing in on [22:2](#), we are confronted with an emotionally wrenching, if not morally confounding, command of God. Let's consider how an all-powerful, all-good God could ask Abraham to sacrifice his only son.

This raises the matter of *theodicy*. Theodicy attempts to explain how an *omnipotent, omni-benevolent* God relates to the existence of *evil* in the world—and, in this case, apparently commanding Abraham to commit an evil act.

Abraham lived among pagans, who incorporated child sacrifice to their gods. *In this cultural context, he would have at least understood God's command.* God was testing Abraham's faith. God had promised Abraham and Sarah as many descendants as the stars in the sky ([Genesis 15:1–5](#)), and Abraham “believed the LORD” (15:6). Would his faith hold firm after being shaken by God's command? Would he still believe in an all-powerful, all-good God? What was at stake had Abraham sacrificed Isaac?

In the bigger picture of God's redemption plan, to what do the allusions “your only son” in 22:2 and “on the third day” in 22:4 refer?

Surprised by God

Selected Scriptures

How do you understand Abraham's phrase, "we will worship" in Genesis 22:5?

Reread Abraham's reply (Genesis 22:8) to Isaac's question (22:7). Do you believe Abraham meant a literal lamb or Isaac as the "lamb"? What is the allusion here?

Joseph

Joseph's dream outraged his brothers. In *Genesis 37:6–9*. What principle from their reaction can you draw regarding other people's responses to God's surprises?

David

Return to *1 Samuel 16:6–7*, reflecting on the last phrase, "but the LORD looks at the heart." What qualities in David's heart may have prompted God's choosing him as king?

Will the Lord prepare you as you expect? Not at all. If you're not careful, you will take personally the trials, the tests, the sudden interruptions, the disappointments, the sadness that accompanies life, the lost jobs, the lost opportunities, and the broken moments. You will think, He's through with me, He's finished with me, when in fact He is equipping you.

—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Surprised by God

Selected Scriptures



Correlation: God's Surprising Plan for Jesus

The disciples expected Jesus to ascend to a political throne. What shock must they have felt when Jesus explained God's will for Him in *Matthew 16:21*?

Peter couldn't accept God's surprising plan, retorting, "Heaven forbid, Lord. . . . This will never happen to you!" (16:22). God's surprise had a purpose that Peter couldn't see. Consider what purposes God may have for His surprises in your life as we apply the principles of our study.



Application: Plan for Surprises

God provides three buoys of hope can we hang on to when He surprises us.

First, *God's preferred method is surprise*. Knowing that God tests our faith with unexpected changes keeps us from being too alarmed when they come.

Second, *God's surprises require flexibility and adaptability*. Be willing to follow Plan B when God scratches out Plan A.

Third, *behind God's surprises are purposes we are not aware of*. Abraham discovered God's provision. David learned that God alone is King. Joseph focused on God's bigger plan: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good" (Genesis 50:20).

Reflect on the surprises encountered by Abraham, Joseph, and David. Is there one story which encouraged you in a fresh way? How so? What promise are you taking from it?

Surprised by God

Selected Scriptures

What surprise from the Lord's hand have you faced? How did it impact you, what change did it require of you, and how did you see Him work in your life?

Take a moment to reflect on your loved ones—family and friends. Is there one who is wrestling with a surprise and needs prayer, encouragement, or direction? How can you support him or her in word or action?

When you find yourself in a situation that you didn't expect, God hasn't made a mistake. You haven't made a mistake. You're just going through the process of internal development that was all part of God's arrangement of events.

—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



A FINAL PRAYER

Close your study by making Pastor Chuck's prayer your own.

Lord, wherever You may find us in this journey called life—however You may be preparing us for whatever You have in mind—find us faithful. Rather than running from You, may we run toward You. May we look heavenward and realize that Your arrangement is sovereignly put together for our good and for Your glory. In the dear name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. To learn more about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* Bible-study method, go to the web page, "[How Does Pastor Chuck Swindoll Study the Bible?](#)"

For the 2025 broadcasts, this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study was developed by Marshall F. Davis in collaboration with Bryce Klabunde, vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages. Copyright © 1999, 2025 by Charles R. Swindoll, Inc. All rights are reserved worldwide. Duplication of copyrighted material for commercial use is strictly prohibited.

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Study 9 • Page 8