

THEME SUMMARY

Theme:

Job 5:9 “He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed, miracles that cannot be counted.”

Key Thought:

I hate surprises. Surprise birthday parties make me cringe. A last-minute change of plans drives me bananas. Yet as a Christ follower and Bible believer, I find Scripture is full of surprises. God is constantly surprising his people in a variety of ways, from his plan to how he cares for them and the future he promises.

Over this week, we will together consider some of these biblical surprises from a leader with a stutter, a meal delivered by birds, a baby born in a manger, water turned into wine, a singing jailbreak and the biggest surprise of all: God raising Jesus from the dead.

But God's surprises didn't stop at the end of the Bible. He continues to surprise us today. And God will surprise you this week as you serve. You will encounter something or someone you would not have expected. It might turn your world upside down for a time, and that is a good thing; it means the Holy Spirit is at work in you. I'm excited for God to surprise us all! So, let's put on our party hats and get ready to be surprised by God!

The Gospel as Reflected in the Theme:

This year, SERVE is all about surprises! In fact, the gospel message itself is a surprise. God, the creator of the universe, came to earth through his son Jesus, born fully God and fully human. He comes to live among us, a sinful bunch of people. Jesus came as the long-promised Messiah, a King. However, the life of Jesus isn't the kind of “king-like life” we'd expect.

He is not proud, instead humble. He doesn't walk over those below him, but stoops down to their level and cares for them. Furthermore, he provides salvation for his people not by fighting but by dying. And as we will see later this week, he doesn't stay dead; he rises victoriously.

The surprising story of salvation doesn't always sit well in the culture we inhabit. Miracles and mighty deliveries are explained away by reason. There is no way this could all be true. Who is really pulling the strings?

But as we will discover, these stories, these true stories, have the ability to shape and mold us in ways we could never dream or imagine.

When we witness God surprising us, we gain confidence. We see that nothing is impossible with Christ. Our problems, the problems of the world, don't stand a chance to weigh us down with Christ guiding us. We become transformed, a new people, a bold people with a new hope; our God constantly surprises us with his morning mercies, mighty miracles and everlasting grace and love.

It is with that hope in our hearts that we can say yes and amen to the words the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus: “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.”

SESSION OUTLINE

Session 1: Ready to Be Surprised?

- **Devotions:** None for this day as groups arrive late afternoon.
- **Key Passage:** Job 5:1-27 (focus on verse 9)
- **Session Focus:** God surprises us in ways we couldn't dream of or imagine.
- **Small Group Discussion:** During this first small group meeting, participants will be encouraged to strike a balance between preparing for surprise, while also being open to surprise in whatever way it comes.

Session 2: Excessive Excuses

- **Devotions:** This morning, participants will reflect on the story of Moses being called by God to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt and how Moses, clearly intimidated by this great responsibility, begins to spew out excuses to God as to why he can't lead this group of people.
- **Key Passage:** Exodus 4:10-12
- **Session Focus:** God surprises us by making us strong even in our weakness.
- **Small Group Discussion:** Students will be challenged to identify some insecurities they had/have for the trip. They will be encouraged to pray for the strength to overcome these feelings.

Session 3: Bird Food

- **Devotions:** This morning, participants will dive into the surprising story of how God provides for Elijah.
- **Key Passage:** 1 Kings 17:1-6
- **Session Focus:** God surprises us by using unconventional methods to bring us into life with him.
- **Small Group Discussion:** Students will be challenged to think of times when God used something unusual to bring about change in their lives. They may also make the connection that sometimes jobs on a SERVE trip can seem odd, yet through these odd jobs, God begins transforming our hearts and our communities.

Session 4: Christmas in Summer

- **Devotions:** It's Christmas in July (or summer). The long-promised Messiah is born in Bethlehem. Participants will remember the surprising ways the birth of the Messiah is announced and the way this new King lives and rules the kingdom!
- **Key Passage:** Luke 2:1-20
- **Session Focus:** God surprises us by showing up where we least expect him.
- **Small Group Discussion:** Participants will be challenged to think about a time God answered a prayer they didn't expect God to answer. They will also be challenged to consider where God showed up today when they least expected it.

Session 5: Water to Wine

- **Devotions:** Today, participants will reflect on Jesus' first miracle. This story shares the surprising way Jesus demonstrates his characteristic of restoring people from a state of shame. We, too, can have confidence that Jesus brings us from a place of shame to a place beside the King of kings.
- **Key Passage:** John 2:1-12
- **Session Focus:** God surprises us by taking on our shame.
- **Small Group Discussion:** On this day, participants will have the opportunity to examine our shame. While it is hard to come face-to-face with those things, participants will also experience the reassurance that Jesus has come to take away our shame.

Session 6: Raised from the Dead

- **Devotions:** Participants will reach the pinnacle of the story of salvation: the account of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. For those who have heard the story many times, the truly miraculous elements can be lost. But we can all stand surprised and amazed that God, while we were still sinners, sent Jesus to save us.
- **Key Passage:** Matthew 28:1-15
- **Session Focus:** God surprises us by saving us even when we didn't deserve it.
- **Small Group Discussion:** Participants will have time and space to reflect and discuss how Jesus' resurrection fills us with joy and gratefulness.

Session 7: Jailbreak

- **Devotions:** Participants will consider what they would do if they were unlawfully sent to prison. Would they act like Paul and Silas? There are surprises around every corner of this exciting story of praise, jailbreak and conversion.
- **Key Passage:** Acts 16:16-40
- **Session Focus:** God surprises us by transforming hearts for him
- **Small Group Discussion:** As participants take time to reflect on the past week, they will be encouraged to look back on their expectations on the first day of SERVE. They will be challenged to reflect on the ways God surprised them this week, and all the ways God will continue to surprise them when they are home again.