

God Moves In A Mysterious Way

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Preacher: Jared Blankenship

[0 : 0 0] William Cooper was one of the most famous poets of the 18th century in England. He was also a hymn writer, but he spent most of his life fighting through severe bouts of depression.

He even spent a year in an insane asylum, if you know anything about his story. After three failed attempts at suicide, he was committed to an institution for a year, and he would continue to struggle with these bouts of depression really throughout his entire life until he died in 1800.

But he did eventually find some refuge at the conclusion of his institutionalization there at St. Albans in England, and even beyond that, he eventually found some refuge in a fervent Christianity.

And despite his ups and downs even throughout his life from that moment until his death, he was really a faithful Christian, and he was a faithful Christian in using the gifts that God had given him in poetry and in writing for the glory of God and for the good of God's people.

Through a series of events after he was released from his hospitalization, he met one couple that he began to live with that introduced him to a man named John Newton. And John Newton, the famous writer of Amazing Grace and pastor in Olney, England, became his pastor and close personal friend.

[1 : 2 6] He would eventually begin to work alongside of John Newton, at least for a few years there in Olney, and he would assist with pastoral duties that Newton had. But primarily what he did was he assisted Newton with a collection of hymns, and they compiled a hymn book.

They called it Olney hymns, and William Cooper contributed a number of his own poems to this particular hymn book. And one of his most well-known of these poems was actually initially published under the heading Light Shining Out of Darkness.

We know it by a different name. We know it by God Moves in a Mysterious Way. Perhaps you've sung the song before in a church service. It was a reflection on the fact that God's work in us, God's work through us, God's work around us, is often quite mysterious.

His ways are routinely difficult for us to comprehend and to understand, or to even recognize that he's at work at all. Here's what the first stanza of Cooper's hymn says.

God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform. He plants his footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm. Deep in unfathomable minds of never-failing skill, he treasures up his bright designs and works his sovereign will.

[2 : 5 8] Cooper understands that.

He understood God's absolute sovereignty over all the events of his life, while also acknowledging that God's work is often a mystery to us. It's mysterious, hard to understand.

Here was Cooper, who was committing his life and his talents and his gifts to the service of the Lord, even after his conversion, and yet he was still suffering. God moves in a mysterious way, is his response.

No matter how many times maybe he sat at home, unable to even attend a church service, because of the deepness of his depression, surely he wondered, is God even working at all? God's work is often a mystery.

God doesn't fill us in on everything we'd like to know about what he's doing, but he instead calls us to trust in his sovereign purposes. Just crucial to the Christian life, isn't it?

[4 : 21] It's not always clear why he uses certain people or certain circumstances in our lives, yet his word shows us repeatedly that he's always working for his glory and for our good.

The story of Shamgar, as small as it may be and as obscure as it may be, is shrouded in the mystery of sovereignty.

God is clearly in control of all the events that are taking place in Shamgar's life, but we're told almost nothing about what happened and why it happened the way that it did. It's a mystery.

But even the things that we do know as we read this one verse about Shamgar is unusual to say the least. When I was a kid, if you were like me, you liked the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

And anybody have a favorite Ninja Turtle? You want to admit who your favorite Ninja Turtle was? Let me tell you who my favorite Ninja Turtle was. You'll never guess it. Donatello. That's weird, isn't it?

[5 : 21] Donatello was a weird favorite Ninja Turtle because Donatello wasn't the cool one. He was the smart one with glasses. And here's what he carried. Not a sword like Michelangelo. Donatello, he carried a stick. That's all he had.

He had a stick. If Ahud is the James Bond of Judges that we learned last week, Shamgar is the Donatello of Judges.

All he has is a stick, essentially. And he carries out this tremendous victory under the power of God. And we look back at that and we think, why in the world does God do things like this?

Why does he do such strange things? His way is mysterious. Really, at the end of the day, the verse, it provokes more questions than it gives answers. But we know that while not all Scripture is equally impactful, it is all profitable.

That's what Paul tells us. It's all profitable for our faith. It's profitable for our maturity in Christ. And this little verse about Shamgar is no exception. And if we will apply our hearts and our minds to wisdom this morning, I think what we will find is that it provides some wonderfully edifying truths about the nature of God's work and God's grace.

[6 : 37] Okay? Looking at the nature of God's work and God's grace. Here's the first thing I want you to see. I want you to see God's preserving grace. God's preserving grace.

We can get into a lot of questions about this particular verse that we can't actually provide answers for. But the most pressing question of all is, why is this story here in the first place?

In fact, you could easily remove it and you wouldn't even recognize that anything was missing in the text. In fact, start reading with me at chapter 3 and verse 30. And we're going to read to the first verse of chapter 4.

But we're going to skip over this verse about Shamgar. Just notice this. So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel and the land had rest 80 years. And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord after Ahud died.

You could literally skip Shamgar and wouldn't even know it. So why is it here? Well, the final phrase of the verse at least gives us the general purpose of it.

[7 : 39] It says, he also saved Israel. That tells us the general purpose, doesn't it? Like every narrative in Judges, this little story is about how God delivers his people.

But that doesn't explain why the author found it so necessary to include this little obscure story in the middle of a book that has much more dramatic stories about that same truth.

Every one of them. We start with Othniel and Ahud and then Barak and Deborah. And then we're going to eventually get to the big ones like Gideon and Jephthah and Samson. They're all saying the same thing.

God is faithful to his covenant. God delivers his people. Right? So why did he feel it so necessary to leave this verse in here? Some have concluded that the verse was a later addition by a different author and really serves no purpose at all.

But that's unhelpful conjecture. It can neither be denied or validated. Many have written that the author was really trying to include 12 different deliverers so that he could match the number of tribes in Israel.

[8 : 47] The fact is God probably raised up many more people than this that helped deliver Israel at various times during this time frame. And the suggestion is the author was just picking 12 of them, 12 of them.

And in doing that, he matches the number of the tribes of Israel. And by matching the number of the tribes of Israel, he communicates that God's salvation is complete. That his salvation is full.

Nothing is left wanting. And to be honest, there is some merit in that particular view. But I still think it lacks a satisfying resolution to this particular question. I want to suggest that the primary purpose of the Shamgar narrative is to highlight an often neglected or maybe even completely ignored aspect of God's salvation.

His preserving grace. And my conclusion is based on the timing of events. Look at the first phrase of this verse. After him was Shamgar.

Well, who is the him? After who? Ahud, right? The timing of Shamgar's exploits overlaps with the leadership of Ahud, which is who we studied last week.

[10 : 00] That's the previous verses. But Ahud's death isn't recorded for us until the first verse of chapter 4 in the Barak cycle.

So notice with me at the end of verse 30, we find that because of Ahud, the Lord gives the land of Israel's land rest for 80 years.

And then when we get to verse 4 and we find that Ahud has died and now the cycle starts all over again and Israel does evil in the sight of the Lord. And then that rest is now taken away. So since the land had rest for 80 years, and at the end of that rest, it's directly linked to Ahud's death, we can deduce that what Shamgar was doing then had a unique purpose in the work that God was doing during the rest.

Okay? Now, that might have been really confusing. Let me try to simplify what I just said. God provides 80 years of rest due to Ahud's victory. Shamgar's actions take place during that time of rest.

Okay? So what's happening with the Philistines is not, the rest isn't being brought to an end. That doesn't happen until the Barak cycle. So Shamgar is operating in between these two narratives, right?

[11 : 16] So what's God doing? Shamgar isn't delivering Israel from an oppressive government like the Moabites or Jabin, the king of Canaan that we'll study about next week.

What Shamgar is doing is preserving the rest that was initiated by Ahud. Do you see that? It's what he's doing.

This is what I'm calling God's preserving grace. His preserving grace. Now, it's possible that there were many people in Israel who were blissfully unaware of the fact that there was a new enemy forming in the northwest corner.

And while they were enjoying the blessings of peace, they might not have even known that there was this farmer in the north land who was fighting off this fierce enemy.

God had raised him up. And the reason was God was preserving their peace. He was delaying something catastrophic. He was preserving the rest.

[12 : 23] Something that maybe they weren't even aware of. We mostly think of God's work in terms of crisis or in the moment of crisis, don't we? We don't always think about what he may be doing to delay or prevent a crisis in our lives altogether.

In fact, it's often in retrospect that as Christians, we look back on particular moments of our lives and we see, okay, I didn't understand it then, but this is what God was doing. And you can clearly trace his hand through the events of your life.

But even then, we typically, in retrospect, relate those things to moments of crisis. Have you ever stopped to consider a time of peace in your life and a time of comfort and joy in your life?

And just look to see, what was God doing in my life to preserve that peace and that joy and that comfort in that particular moment? I think that's what God's doing with Shamgar. It is a unique feature of God's grace that we don't often think about.

He's preserving something for his people. Preserving something. He had brought his people peace and was graciously preserving it, even though they had probably already begun to slip into another cycle of idolatry.

[13 : 35] That's what's even more amazing about it. It's not that Ahud dies in verse 1 of chapter 4, and then just all of a sudden, the next morning, everybody wakes up and decides, okay, I guess we'll worship Bel again.

That's not what's happening. And as we've said, week by week, the cries of Israel out for deliverance, they weren't necessarily cries of repentance. They were cries of distress. Please help. It wasn't returning.

It was please help. And God took pity and compassion on them, and he delivered them despite their sin. So during this time of peace, we can understand that Israel was still doing what they should not have done.

There may have been some type of reform, but they were still in sin. And yet God still does this amazing work. Undoubtedly, God was giving his people more time, more time to turn back and repent before he unleashes another round of wrath.

They would eventually be able to look back and see that that's what he's doing, I think, that God was patiently enduring their sin. Perhaps you've been in a moment, or maybe you're in a moment in your life right now that matches Israel's situation pretty clearly.

[14 : 51] You've spent a lot of your life maybe in rejection of God, or at least in rejection of really full commitment and surrender to God. You've kind of toyed around with it. You've done the Christian thing, but you've never really surrendered to Christ.

And you've enjoyed peace. Your life really hasn't been all that bad. You've had it fairly easily, perhaps. Sure, we all have moments where things are tough and difficult, but for the most part, your life has been pretty easy, and you feel really comfortable in that ease.

And what you don't realize is that the peace that you feel is the grace of God's kindness that's actually meant to bring you to repentance. He's withholding wrath for a season in order to give you time to turn back to Him.

Isn't that not what it seems like He's doing with Israel here? He raises up a man to help them when they don't even know that they need help, perhaps. And He does it in order to keep from pouring out His own wrath so early.

Paul talks about this in the book of Romans. Romans chapter 2, he says, Do you presume on the riches of God's kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

[16:10] And when we don't use that time frame for repentance, Paul goes on to say, Because of your hard and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

The Shamgar narrative tells us of God's steadfast love and grace. He preserves rest for His people and He preserves time for people to repent, but that time to repent will eventually come to an end.

That's Paul's point. Don't you realize God's being kind to you right now? He is giving you time to come back, time to turn, time to believe.

And as long as you continue with a hard and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath. It's like you've got a barn in your backyard and it's designated for all of the terrible things that God's going to judge your life for.

And you just keep adding to it with no hope. And eventually the barn doors are going to open and you're going to have to face every bit of wrath that comes out of it. Don't you realize God is gracious to give you time to turn?

[17:19] Don't you realize that we owe gratitude to God for all the ways we don't see that He is preserving peace for us right now? That's the first thing we see. God's preserving grace.

Number two, God's peculiar methods. God's peculiar methods. This is really no surprise to us, right? We're used to God working in strange ways. Look again at verse 31.

After him was Shamgar, the son of Anath. Well, let's think about this man for just a moment. The text is almost entirely silent about his identity, but there are a couple of clues here that may help us, particularly his name and designation.

And though they don't answer all of our questions, they do reveal enough for us to see something of God's peculiar work in choosing Shamgar, okay?

Here's what's strange about it. Shamgar is not a Hebrew name. It's a Canaanite name. He might not have even been an Israelite at all.

[18:20] But even more is his designation, son of Anath. This connects him to the Canaanite gods. Now, it's not unusual for you to read your Bible and find that somebody was identified by being the son of a particular father, right?

When Jesus even came back to Nazareth and he was preaching the gospel, remember what the people say? Is this not Joseph's son, right? We see this all throughout the Bible.

What's unique about this particular name is that this is not a man's name. This is a woman's name, which is not quite as usual in the Bible for someone to be identified by their mother.

But then when we dig in just a little bit further, we find not only is this a female name, Anath was the name of an ancient Egyptian goddess of war. And the Canaanites worshipped her as one of Baal's consorts.

So Baal is their big god, and then Baal has all of these female goddesses that are like his queens. And we've already talked about Ashtaroah that way. Well, the Canaanites believed that Anath was one such queen, one of these consorts, and they worshipped her as a false god.

[19:31] Some have even suggested that maybe Shamgar belonged to an elite group of soldiers that we know about historically that were known as the troop of Anath, and that this designation is connecting in there.

All of it makes us question, is Shamgar even an Israelite at all? And wouldn't it be somewhat strange, at least in this book, for God to choose someone to use that doesn't even belong to his covenant people?

That would seem a little strange, doesn't it? I think Shamgar's heritage actually does something for us here. It represents the general disobedience of Israel, which in Judges is underscored by their proclivity for intermarrying with the Canaanites, and then subsequently worshipping the Canaanite gods.

Hasn't that been the problem? From the very beginning, God said, don't marry them, extinguish them. But what Israel did immediately was they married them, and they did exactly what God said would happen.

They intermarry with the people of the land, and then they begin to worship the gods of the land. And now we see this guy Shamgar come up, and I think maybe he's a representative of this particular sin.

[20 : 41] It's possible he was a Canaanite, but there is a pattern in Judges of God raising up deliverers from Israel who have less than ideal pedigrees.

Jephthah would be another noticeable part of that pattern. Either way, here's the takeaway. God is pleased to use broken, sinful people for his glory and for the good of his people.

Isn't that interesting? There's this problem going on in the north. We would expect, who's God gonna raise up to do something? Well, surely it's gonna be like the golden boy Othniel, right, who we have nothing negative about at all in the book of Judges.

Surely it's gonna be somebody like Joshua, somebody like Caleb, who God is gonna use, but it's not that at all. It's Shamgar. Shamgar, who if he's not a Canaanite himself, is at least identified by name as a Canaanite worshiper.

And yet God uses this man. After all, who else is God gonna use? Apart from the Lord Jesus, there's no other kind of person.

[21 : 59] Are you a broken, sinful human? Guess what? Be encouraged. You're precisely the type of person God wants to employ in his work of grace. And just by a little bit of study on this man's name, we find out something else about our God, that he's not looking for perfection for use.

He'll use anybody. But God's choice of Shamgar is not the only peculiar thing about God's methods in this verse. Let's consider the way that God used him. Look again at the verse.

After him was Shamgar, the son of Anath, who killed 600 of the Philistines, with an ox goad. 600 of the Philistines with an ox goad.

Now the Philistines, this is the first time we're really being introduced to them in this book. We're not gonna hear from them again until we get to the Samson cycle. And then of course, you're gonna read all about them beyond that in the books of Samuel and Kings.

The Philistines were a seafaring people. They originated from the island of Crete or other places around the Aegean Sea. And they arrived in Palestine about the same time as Israel.

[23 : 07] Israel was coming in in the southeast by land. The Philistines were coming in in the northwest by sea. And they began in the northern end, which is probably where Shamgar was fighting against them.

Eventually, they would move south because they had no success in the north, perhaps because of Shamgar. So they move south and they eventually settle in the southwest region of Israel with five city-states that become confederate with one another.

And they become a complete pain in the neck to King Saul and to King David later on. You know exactly what they do. They were trained warriors, making Shamgar's success that much more unbelievable.

So here we have a peculiar deliverer facing a determined enemy. But the most peculiar facet of the whole story is Shamgar's weapon, an ox goad, which was a crude farming instrument used for prodding cattle.

It was a thick rod, eight to ten feet in length. And on the end of it would have maybe a nail or some type of iron hook on the end. And what they would do is they were plowing their fields in order to get and motivate and provoke the oxen to move forward.

[24 : 27] They would poke them or they would smack them or whatever it was. And on the back end of that stick would just be a flat edge that they would use to clean out the plows. This is not a weapon. It's used as one, but it's not what it is.

It's a crude farming tool. Shamgar did not have a sufficient weapon for war. And yet, God uses him to kill 600 of these Philistines.

Probably not all at once. Probably in that guerrilla type warfare that farmers and militia people are known for in the United States from about 250 years ago. Here's what Matthew Henry said about it.

It's no matter how weak the weapon is, if God direct and strengthen the arm. An ox goad, when God pleases, shall do more than Goliath's sword.

And sometimes he chooses to work by such unlikely means that the excellency of the power may appear to be of God. Just as an ox goad becomes a powerful weapon of war in the hands of Shamgar, so does Shamgar become a mighty weapon of war in the hands of Almighty God.

[25 : 46] You see, God loves using crude instruments like us to affect deliverance for his people. Paul says it to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 4-7, but we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

The treasure that Paul spoke of is the gospel of Jesus. And each of us, each believer, we're a jar of clay, a brittle pot.

There's nothing glamorous about it. There's nothing particularly useful about it. We're elaborate about it. And yet God still uses us to bring sinners to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Again, we may be broken, sinful people, but God is pleased to use us for his glory, for the good of his people.

Is that not a primary takeaway here? Is that not something that we often forsake in our lives? We come up with every excuse in the world for why God can't use us or won't use us or whatever it is, and we drift off into oblivion of Christian apathy.

[27 : 07] And then we come to a passage like this and we see, you mean God was able to do this with this guy and with this thing? We may not be flashy, polished instruments, but God loves using the weak things of the world to confound the wise and the strong.

Earlier this week, Kara text, Julie and I, she had put together a, I don't think she would mind me saying this, she had put together a, just like a little blurb about her personal testimony of conversion that she wanted to include either on a website or in a gift package for her business that she runs.

And she was asking that we would read over it for language. And then she asked this question and she said, she said, do you even think that this is a useful way to try to share the gospel with somebody?

And you know my response to that question is, why not? Why not? You know what I think God loves to use? Little insignificant paragraphs about our testimony of conversion.

I think he's pleased to use those things. Why not? I had two different conversations this week. One with Andy and Amy and then one with Chris about people that they know that they've thought about inviting to our friend day in two weeks.

[28 : 28] The problem is, both situations involve somebody whose first language is in English. And the question is, is it even worth it to really go so far as to invite them when they may not get anything out of it?

And my response is, why not? If God doesn't use the crude things of the world, if he isn't using the unusual circumstances of the world, what's he going to use?

I think he loves to use things like that. I think God loves to use people to bring, look at what God did in the Bible. He spoke truth through a donkey at one point.

You don't think he could maybe use me once? You remember the day of Pentecost? These simple fishermen, they stand out in Acts chapter 2 in Jerusalem and they begin to proclaim the gospel of God.

But all of these people, they weren't hearing it in Hebrew. They were hearing it in their own language. God does weird things. God does miraculous things.

[29 : 29] God is limitless in his power. Who cares what it is? Just put out your ox code. Just get it out of the closet. Start to wield it and see what God might do.

Why not use your seemingly weak method to reach others for God? If God can use ShamGuard and his ox code, he can surely use us, right? I think God is pleased to use little churches that meet in elementary schools.

I think God is pleased to use kids programs that have six or seven kids on a Sunday afternoon. I think God is pleased to use the coffee top conversations and of course, God is pleased to use the elaborate ministries as well.

There is no limit to what God can do. And when are we going to stop telling them how limited he is? When are we going to stop telling God, I'm not useful enough.

You can't do this. You can't do this thing or this would never work. Why would we tell God something like that? ShamGuard killed 600 warriors with a farming tool.

[30 : 39] You're telling me he can't use that friend day card that was on your chair to bring one person to a service that might hear the gospel and respond in the grace of God?

Wasn't this Cooper's point in that hymn? God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform. Deep and unfathomable minds of his unfailing skill, he works out his sovereign will.

We don't have to know what he's doing or even think that it's worth it. You just have to do it. God goes from there. Third thing I'd like you to see is God's power to save.

God's power to save. Last phrase, he also saved Israel. He also saved Israel. ShamGuard's an obscure individual to us for sure, but we ought not let that lead us to think that he was unknown during his own time.

He probably wasn't. Eventually, maybe not at the particular time that he was doing these things, but eventually he became known in Israel. Chapter 5 tells us that. Just flip over to chapter 5 and verse 6.

[31 : 51] This is the song of Deborah and Barak, and here's what they say in verse 6. In the days of Shamgar, son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the highways were abandoned and travelers kept to the byways.

So, they're even referencing his time frame, not only for what he did, they're referencing an era based on ShamGuard, which tells us that not only was this an honorable thing to ShamGuard and Jael eventually, but this was somebody that became renowned in Israel for what he had done.

Not only was he familiar enough to be included in the song, but that particular era is referenced by his and Jael's work, which is surely a sign of honor, as I said.

But despite his eventual fame as a deliverer, we can't miss the fact that his success was not due to his personal abilities, right?

ShamGuard's victories against the Philistines were miracles. They were miracles from the mighty hand of God. And this verse may not specifically articulate that, but it does come later in the book.

[33 : 07] Flip over to chapter 10. Chapter 10. And look with me at verse 10.

Chapter 10, verse 10. And the people of Israel cried out to the Lord, saying, We have sinned against you. We have forsaken our God and have served the bills. And here's what the Lord said.

This is just before the Jephthah cycle. And the Lord said to the people of Israel, did I not save you from the Egyptians and from the Amorites, from the Ammonites, and from the, who's that last group?

The Philistines. Now, before this point in the book of Judges, the Philistines are only mentioned one time. ShamGar. What's God saying to Israel in chapter 10?

He is claiming victory over the Philistines. He himself claims responsibility for having saved the nation from this new enemy.

[34 : 10] However unique ShamGar's abilities might have been, it was the Spirit of God that empowered him in this moment to do what he did. ShamGar was simply an instrument in the hands of God who alone has the power to save his people.

And this fact has never changed. When we consider our own deliverance from sin and death, we must never think that it has come through any power in us.

We need to be careful not to glorify God's instruments of grace above God himself. As grateful as we are for the people God has used to guide us to Christ, they are just instruments in the hand of God who alone has power to save.

That's the point. Salvation belongs to God. He alone deserves glory for what ShamGar did. He alone deserves glory for your conversion.

He alone deserves glory for whatever he may or may not do in our church here. And is this not the song that we'll sing in eternity? Revelation 7, After this I looked and behold a great multitude that no one could number from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands.

[35 : 38] Here's what they cried out with a loud voice. Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb. It would be a mistake to come to this text, this little verse, and say, how awesome was ShamGar?

No. We come to this little verse the same way we come to all the others and judges and we say, what an amazing God that he would use such crude people and such crude instruments to deliver his people.

What an amazing God he is. And we must reflect on that in our own lives. We think about our own conversion. We don't say, man, what a great preacher this guy was that I came to faith.

He might have been a great preacher. We say, what a great God that he would open my heart to believe. What a great God that he would go to such great lengths to rescue my soul from sin and hell.

As impressive as ShamGar's deliverance was, it unfortunately didn't last. It wasn't long before Israel was in danger again and as you know, the Philistines became a formidable foe against Israel for a long time.

