

# Unexpected News

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, I loved Jason Donovan and his mullet at the time. I'm not going to get any of you to admit this, but I just have a confession to make. I was completely obsessed with Neighbours when I was a teenager.

Luckily, I lived quite close to school, so I was very popular with all my mates, because at lunchtime we would run home, have our sandwiches whilst watching Neighbours, and then leg it backwards, you know, to get back in time for the afternoon.

So Neighbours, just like lots of other soap operas, have cliffhangers at the end of the show. Usually, just as the programme is finishing, some big news gets dropped on someone.

It would often be a woman telling a man, I'm pregnant, and it either was or wasn't his baby. And then the camera goes over to the person that's just been told this news, and their face is all contorted, as it shows dramatically how this is affecting them.

So during lockdown, I have to admit also, I got quite addicted to this. I used House of Cards. It's an American series on Netflix. It's based on an 80s drama, apparently.

[ 1 : 10 ] I used to pretend that this was a really, you know, insightful political drama, but actually, it was just another soap opera, with lots of politics, intrigue, betrayal, that kind of thing.

So it sounds kind of funny, but most of us have had moments in our lives when we receive unexpected news. We might be going in a particular direction, and something happens to redirect our path.

And thank goodness for most of us, they're not recorded on TV for posterity. We're in the fourth and the final week of Advent, the time in the church calendar before Christmas, where the tension between the resurrection of Jesus and his return is happening.

Over the four weeks, we've been preparing our hearts for the coming of the Messiah, and now we find ourselves just six days away from Christmas Eve, when we're going to have our Christingle services.

And by the way, I'm really excited about that, and I hope you're going to invite all your friends to come to that too. So on this fourth Sunday of our Advent journey, we're going to have a little look behind the scenes of Jesus' impending arrival, as we prepare our hearts for Christmas.

[ 2 : 25 ] In the first 17 verses of Matthew, we see Jesus' ancestry, his genealogy. And unlike the account in Luke that shows his lineage through Mary, this account traces his descendants of Abraham and David, to show that Jesus is going to be the new Davidic kin.

So imagine to first century hearers, when they hear about this lineage, and then turning the page on this account of Mary becoming pregnant. I don't think it would be what they would expect.

This account isn't a warm and fuzzy, lovely baby in a manger telling of the story. It reads a bit like a soap opera, with unexpected news, a decision to make, an angelic visit, and a fulfilment of an ancient prophecy, that sounds a bit more like Harry Potter or Lord of the Rings.

Yet as we heard a moment ago, it's the account of Joseph contending with the fact that Mary, the woman he's engaged to, is pregnant. And just like in the soap opera, it's not his baby.

This morning, we see that there are often interruptions to our lives, but that God's been orchestrating things all along, rooted in his love. And that if we look for a Messiah, we learn to trust him, that he will work things out for good in the end.

[ 3 : 50 ] So look at verse 18. This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about. His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit, it says.

To grasp what's really going on here, we have to look at the culture of the time. When it says that Mary and Joseph were pledged to be married, what does that mean? It's quite a bit different to

engagement in our time.

Mary was probably between 12 and 16 years of age, a teenager, and Joseph would have been 18 to 20, and the marriage was planned probably by the parents. The idea of marriage and engagement was two parts, the engagement itself and then the marriage.

The engagement was the official committal. But unlike in these days, if we call an engagement off, you know, that's how it is, actually it would be treated really seriously then as a divorce.

And in fact, if either of the people passed away while they were engaged, they would be treated as widows or widowers, almost as if they were in marriage. Engagement lasted about a year, and they weren't really allowed to kind of spend a lot of time together on their own.

[ 5 : 03 ] So imagine being forced to get married to someone that you hardly knew. So Joseph himself was in a really strange situation. The woman, or actually the girl really, that he was betrothed to be married to, became pregnant through the Holy Spirit.

Now we don't have a record of that conversation, but I wouldn't have minded being a fly on the wall. When Joseph says to Mary, Hey Mary, you seem like you're putting on a bit of weight.

I thought you were on the Slim Fast Diet. What's going on? And Mary says, Oh, really? This? Well, it's a funny story I've got to tell you. It's the Holy Spirit's baby. If we're honest, how would we feel if we were Joseph?

It would be natural to assume that since they hadn't been together, that Mary had been unfaithful. And this presented a real problem for Joseph. Because Joseph was faithful to the law, and the law was clear, he could have insisted that they get divorced, or actually she could have been stoned to death for infidelity.

It didn't happen an awful lot, but it was possible. So what do you do when you're trying to do the right thing? When you're trying to walk the right path, and a curveball gets thrown in your face?

[ 6 : 17 ] In verse 19 it says, Because Joseph, her husband, was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. So Joseph was doing his best to follow the law.

He was the righteous man. And really he only had two options here. The first thing was to go public with it. Tell everybody, put it on Instagram, on Facebook, show her shame in the headlights, and explain the consequences that were going to happen to her.

Or the second thing was to divorce her quietly and privately. Now we all know we've got the benefit of hindsight. We know what he did, and that he's a good guy. But imagine how he felt.

His plans and his dreams had come crashing down. His plans to start a family, become a dad, they were laid out and they got interrupted. Maybe you felt that way.

You were maybe waiting on something special, something you were looking forward to. Maybe you were looking forward to a dream that you dreamed to come true. I think we've all experienced these moments of waiting for something good and experiencing massive loss and disappointment along the way.

[ 7 : 28 ] Remember, Joseph was human, so he had no doubt a swirl of human emotions and a desire to honour God and to follow the law. But also I think that it's a clear picture here of the character of God being modelled through Joseph.

Instead of publicly shaming her, even though I'm sure he felt shame, he honoured her and protected her, and he extended his mercy towards her. And it's the same with us.

God's faithfulness and his mercy are always on display. Life might be messy and you might not see it. Your marriage or your relationship might be strained, your business might be struggling, work might not be going well, or you might be in between jobs.

But in the midst of the fog of all of those things, God's faithfulness and his mercy are always on display. And I think that's really good news. Think of a time when you deserved the exact opposite of mercy, but God gave you grace and protected you along the way.

Verse 20 goes on. The angel explains what's going to happen. He says, do not be afraid. I imagine the angels probably said that quite a bit because I can't imagine how I'd feel if I came across a massive angelic being.

[ 8 : 45 ] But I think what the angel was saying to Joseph was, don't be afraid to take Mary home as your wife. Don't be afraid to trust her and follow the plan and be obedient to God, even though it doesn't make sense.

Change your plans. We sometimes get asked to do that too, and that's tough for us. We like to control things and order things in a certain way. But in those seasons of waiting for God to show up, sometimes he provides a divine interruption.

And it inevitably changes the way that we see things, the game, and requires us to trust him. That famous proverb, Proverbs 16, a person plans his course, but the Lord directs his steps.

How many times have you made a really good and sensible plan and God redirects you for some reason? So Joseph and Mary named him Jesus. Jesus literally means God saves.

And it's a name that reflects the hope of the time. God saves. But this time it was God ordained.

How powerful it must have been for God to give this guy, give Jesus the name.

[ 9 : 58 ] That he was going to be the child to save the people from their sins. Now at this point, Matthew kind of pauses and looks at the camera and speaks to the Jewish audience to explain this story to them.

And he refers back in verse 22 to Isaiah. And he says, All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and they will call him Immanuel, which means God with us.

So Isaiah there was foreshadowing the fact that a virgin would conceive a child and they would call him Immanuel. So they would understand what he was talking about. So the literal meaning of Immanuel is God with us.

And John 1 shows us that Jesus literally was the fulfillment of God with us, Immanuel. So it's like Matthew pulling aside his audience and saying, Listen, this is credible.

This story is the literal fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah. I'm writing about it now. It happened. So as we prepare our hearts for Christmas, we see something powerful.

[ 11 : 07 ] This soon-to-be-born baby has two names given to him. Jesus, God saves. This is about what God does. And the second, God is with us.

This is about who God is. He is present with us. He saves us and he is present with us. For hurting and oppressed people, that must have been brilliant news.

And for us too, we all need a reminder that when we are waiting or moving forward with our plans and God interrupts, we need to remember that it's God's very nature to save.

He gave us his son, the name Jesus, which means God saves. So God is the one that's responsible to guide you, to guard you, to protect you as you move forward on your journey.

And the second thing I want you to really hear loud and clear is that God's nature is to be with you. His presence is with you. Jesus is Emmanuel.

[ 12 : 08 ] God is with us through good and bad times. Both of those things, God saves and God is with us, is really, really good news. And that is at the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Christ. So finally, Joseph has been deliberating about what to do and the angel came to him in a dream. The Bible has many stories of God using dreams to speak to people.

Sometimes God speaks to us in the most unexpected ways. Sometimes as we are waiting, we miss what God is doing right in front of us because we're expecting something different.

But it doesn't mean that God didn't show up. Sometimes it's a dream. Sometimes it's through the scriptures. And sometimes it's through the wise words of a godly friend.

If we go on to verse 24, it says, Joseph woke up. When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son.

[ 13 : 14 ] And he gave him the name Jesus. So Joseph had a plan. It was interrupted an angel met him and redirected him. And then we see that Joseph did exactly what the angel of the Lord had commanded him to do.

Out of love, he took home Mary as his wife. So I want us to leave us with these three observations from the text.

The first thing, God saves us and God is with us. Even if life is going really well right now, think on those words. That's why we follow Jesus.

That is the good news and the heart of the gospel. God saves and God is with us. The second thing is God's deep redirection is always for the best. It might not feel like it right now and it might feel scary.

I don't know why Jesus hasn't returned yet. I wish I could tell you. But I can tell you that his plan is perfect. And the third thing, Joseph shows us how to be faithful to the scriptures but filled with grace

and mercy.

[ 14 : 18 ] Yes, Joseph was a man of the book but he also had a heart of Jesus, the heart of God and he treated her with dignity and respect and mercy and that's the way that God treats all of us and that's what we are called to do as we treat others.

So as we get ready to turn the page into Christmas, we get to see some behind the scenes of Joseph trying to do the right thing and then hearing God along the way. We also get to see that the birth of Jesus was messy and I want to encourage all of us to look expectantly towards this Jesus that we proclaim, to wait for him, to allow him to redirect us as we go on our journey and to trust that he has and he will do great things for us, in us and through us.

Maybe for you, you need to embrace that God saves and God is with you. Maybe you need to accept that God's redirection and stop resisting or maybe you need to show grace and mercy to someone you've been only expressing truth to.

So let's pray. Lord, I pray today for those of us who just need to hear from you.

Would you speak to them clearly? Lord, would you help us to embrace that you save and that you're with us, to experience you fully in this season?

[ 15 : 46 ] Lord, for those of us who are struggling to be redirected, would you help us to just stop resisting and trying to control everything? And Lord, for those of us who are really keen on sharing truth but not mercy and grace, would you redirect us to let the fruit of the Spirit flow in and through us?

Lord, we pray for your mercy, your grace and your truth. We're excited to worship you, great, great King. And we ask this in the strong, powerful name of Jesus.

And together as a church we say, Amen. Thank you. Amen.