

Christmas Eve

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[0 : 00] I want to begin by asking you a question. I wonder if you've had your Christmas plans ever go wrong. Anyone? Has all your careful work and your planning ever ended up on its head?

Perhaps you've burnt the pork crackling or some other roast meal. Has anyone done that? Not as many who are willing to admit it. Maybe you plan to move to Melbourne from a warmer climate and discovered that Christmas Day could be cold.

Or maybe you've done all the right things. You've planned early. You've ordered presents with plenty of time. You've done all the things that need to be done, but it's everyone else who messes up.

This is a bit like one of my friends, Andrew. He planned to buy his son a great toy from this shop in Sydney. It was in stock and he ordered it two weeks before Christmas.

It was Sydney to Melbourne, so only a few days delivery. It had arrived in plenty of time. I spoke to him late last week and it still hadn't come.

[1 : 11] Nine days after he ordered it and there was only two working days left before Christmas. What was happening? He didn't know what he was going to do. There was nowhere else he could get the same thing.

He planned ahead so carefully. He'd done everything he should have, but all his careful planning was being messed up.

You might be able to think of a time when your Christmas plan didn't work out. Maybe those you were relying on didn't do their bit or perhaps you were too ambitious or just plain bad luck.

But tonight we're going to look at a passage which we might call the story of the first Christmas from Matthew chapters 1 and 2. In this story, we're going to see what God planned for the first Christmas.

And from what it looks like as we read it, it sort of seems as though God's Christmas plan doesn't really go right. Things happen that you might not expect.

[2 : 19] People seem to behave in unhelpful or frustrating ways. It sort of seems as though God's plan gets messed up like ours can. But as we look closely at this story, what we'll see in these unexpected and possibly even unwanted events by those involved, that God's plan unfolds exactly as he planned.

Well, for the first Christmas, God had a massive blowout prepared. And it begins with the birth of a baby called Jesus.

This is point one. The story begins in chapter 1, verse 18, with the start of a new family. An engaged couple, Mary and Joseph, maybe you've heard of them.

They had a baby on the way. What a lovely story. But before long, it seems as though there's something out of place. Joseph is looking forward to getting married.

He's making all the arrangements like booking a reception venue on a Tuesday afternoon because the weekends are too expensive. He's like, people will come. It's my wedding. And he heads over to Mary's place to tell her about all he's been doing.

[3 : 38] And he notices that she looks a bit different. Mary, my dear, I'm not really sure how to say this.

You know I love you and I think the world of you. But is there any chance that you might be pregnant? What a great way to put a damper on an engagement.

And what an odd way for the first Christmas to begin. This is God's story and the story of his son, Jesus.

How odd that it would begin with what looks like an unplanned pregnancy. Joseph would understandably be upset. Not only would it feel like a betrayal, but he was a righteous man and a

premarital pregnancy in his culture was simply unacceptable.

But Joseph wasn't cruel. He wouldn't expose Mary to public disgrace. So he decided to divorce her quietly. But before he had the chance, God intervenes.

[4 : 48] And not only to tell Joseph what's going on, but to show him and us that what's happening, despite what it seems, is actually all going according to plan.

Just have a listen from verse 20 up on the screen. But after he had considered this, that is quietly, quietly divorcing Mary, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will give birth to a son and you were to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said to the prophet. The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and they will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us.

The birth of Jesus in this way was part of God's plan. Not an unplanned pregnancy and an unwanted child.

But a planned pregnancy from the Holy Spirit. And a child who would be called God. You see, while it seems like things are not going to plan.

[6 : 08] God shows us that this is exactly what he planned and promised would happen. But as the story continues, it seems as though these plans are hitting the fan more and more.

Chapter 2 begins with these guys called the Magi or the wise men who clearly named themselves. They rock up to Jerusalem in search of this king of the Jews.

But when the current king, who's more of a Roman appointed king, hears about this birth of the king of the Jews, he and all Jerusalem with him are disturbed.

And now at this point, you might wonder. However, if God's plan is to raise up a savior king for his people, who at this point in time are the Jews, why would the highest Jewish authority and all the Jewish people be shocked and disturbed by the news that this king had come?

Could God have planned this? Well, eventually the Magi find where the king was born. They went to his house and they found his mother Mary and presenting him with kingly gifts, they worshipped him.

[7 : 30] Finally, a response that we might expect to the king God has sent for Christmas. Worship, adoration and joy. But before long, the celebration of this birth turns extremely dark.

And instead of this king coming to his own people with the same kind of joy and worship that we just saw, his own, that is, the Jewish king Herod, commits mass murder in an attempt to have him killed. Look at the slide, verse 16 of chapter 2. When Herod realized that he'd been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious. And he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

God's Christmas plan is the birth of a king who would save his people. But what seems to have happened instead is the death of possibly hundreds of Jewish children.

What are we to think of this? Has God messed up? Was he hoping for a more positive response from Jerusalem and Herod? Gee, I really hope they like him.

[8 : 53] Well, no. God doesn't guess. God doesn't wonder. And God certainly doesn't make mistakes. Now, in fact, in this horrific event, carried out by an evil and a jealous king, God shows us his plan being carried out just as he planned.

In verse 17 and 18, right after Herod's atrocious act, we read, Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled.

A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping in great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted because they are no more. Now, when we read this, it may be easy for us to think, but why?

Why would God plan this? Well, the simple answer is this. It is for us and for our salvation that people like Herod and the Jews responded to Jesus with such evil and hatred.

Jesus' apostles actually explained this very issue to the Jews who rejected and killed Jesus. They said in Acts chapter 2 verse 23, Jesus was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge, and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.

[10 : 30] So when we look at God's Christmas plan for the birth of a saviour king and all we see is mass murder, it can be easy to wonder, God, how could it go so wrong?

But when we look closely and see what God is doing for our sake, what we actually see is not mass murder and a messy Christmas, but rather fulfilment of a promise in a plan which is for our salvation.

Well, unsurprisingly, as a result of Herod's erratic behaviour, Joseph and the family had to run away.

But God isn't caught off guard. He sends an angel to warn Joseph in a dream and they escape to Egypt. And then after Herod dies, they're able to return to Jerusalem where they're from.

But when Joseph learns that Herod's son is reigning, with God's guidance, they go past Jerusalem and settle in Nazareth.

[11 : 37] Now, Nazareth will be familiar to some of you who know the gospel stories. Is that right? Jesus of Nazareth. That sounds right. But for a Jewish person reading a story about God's promised king, it would sound plain wrong.

They'd hear this and think, hold on. They'd hear to say the Messiah grew up in Nazareth. You know how every city has a suburb or a region which everyone looks down on?

A place which people would think nothing good would ever come out of there. Since I grew up in Sydney, I don't really understand those geographical tensions in Melbourne.

And so I was thinking about telling you about a place like that in Sydney, a place which I sort of consider to be another world called the Shire. They had their trashy reality shows.

They had their overly patriotic Aussie culture. And of course, their hairy feet. But as I was thinking about this, I realised it doesn't matter where you're from or where that place is for you.

[12 : 55] And if I ever met them or saw them on the news, I would find myself judging them even before they speak, thinking nothing good could come from there.

I don't know if you can relate to this. But this attitude was alive and kicking in Jesus' day as well. This is what the Jews would have thought of people who came from Nazareth.

In fact, one of Jesus' own disciples, even before he met him, said exactly that in John chapter 1. Philip found Nathanael and told him, we have found the one Moses wrote about in the law and about whom the prophets also wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.

Nazareth? Can anything good come from there? Nathanael asked. Once again, it seems as though the crazy events surrounding Jesus' birth have been totally messed up by God's Christmas plan. Sorry, have messed up God's Christmas plan. This baby was supposed to be the saviour king for God's people. How could this happen when they feel this way about him?

[14 : 12] Well, because while we see messy or even failed plans, God shows us that he knows what he's doing.

He shows us fulfilment and promise. You see, Matthew concludes this story by saying that according to the prophets, the saviour king will be called a Nazarene, that is, from Nazareth. And so despite what people think of Jesus or even what they conspired to do to him, he will be the king that God promised, born in the city of David and called a Nazarene.

You see, what this story shows us is that God's plans don't fail. They happen according to plan. God's Christmas plan to bring about the birth of a promised saviour king, despite looking a bit messy or strange, unfolded exactly as it was supposed to.

The king that God sent to save wasn't supposed to be a political tyrant, but rather, as the prophets had said, a suffering servant.

[15 : 26] And his humble beginnings are exactly what led to his violent rejection and death, which as God planned, would be for our salvation.

So what does all this mean for us today? When our Christmas plans fail, it sucks, doesn't it?

There's nothing we can really do about it. It's frustrating and annoying. My friend Andrew, who I mentioned at the start, he was distressed when I spoke to him about his boy not getting the Christmas that he'd planned.

And so he called the company that he ordered this toy from to find out what's the problem. What's going on? It said a few days delivery and Christmas is only four days away.

It turned out that Andrew wasn't the only person who'd been calling with this problem. In fact, over a hundred others hadn't received their Christmas presents either. He discovered that the owner of that shop had his own problems and he'd been on the phone with the CEO of Australia Post.

[16 : 35] Why? Well, because there are 150 orders which they sent to Auspost for delivery that day and Australia Post lost the whole crate. Every person waiting for Sydney to Melbourne delivery

wasn't going to get their order in time.

Our plans fail and often there's nothing we can do. Sometimes we cry, sometimes we yell and it sucks.

But at least we can try again next year. What sucks even more is when our plans in life fail. The plans which we invest so much more in and which can hurt so much more when they don't work out.

like a plan to see family or perhaps to reconcile with them. Maybe a plan to get married or to have kids. A plan to get a job or at least to keep one.

Maybe a plan to get into that course or to finally finish one. A plan to get fit or maybe just to get better.

[17 : 48] Often the outcomes of these plans are way out of our control. But still, when they don't work out, it sucks and it hurts, doesn't it? And so why am I dwelling on these sad and frustrating times when Christmas is supposed to be a time of joy?

Well, because of what God's Christmas plan means for us. God's Christmas plan didn't fail. It happened exactly as He wanted. The reason we're looking at it and reflecting on our own failures is because the success of His plan is for us.

God's Christmas plan actually rescues us from our failure. And it restores what causes all the problems in our life. God's Christmas plan, the birth of the Saviour King, saves us from all our sin. It saves us from our sadness. It saves us from our frustration, from our broken relationships, from our sickness, even from our death. God's plan doesn't mean that when my plans work, God loves me and when they don't, He's forgotten.

No, it means, like the angel said to Joseph way back at the start, that the promised Saviour King, Jesus, will save His people from their sins.

[19 : 17] This is a far better gift than success and happiness at Christmas and it's certainly a far better gift than success and happiness in life because it means that our relationship with the God who made us can be restored.

And while we may and probably will fail or suffer in life, those who follow this King will receive a new life in which we will never suffer, we will never fail and which will never end.

Many of us will still have a few plans on the boil tonight which we hope will come off well over the next 24 or 48 hours. Perhaps a perfectly cooked lamb shoulder.

A good response from the people you bought presents for. Maybe a civil Christmas lunch. Some of us will succeed and some of us may not.

So this Christmas in light of all the uncertainty in our Christmas planning as well as our plans for 2019 and beyond, I encourage you to make a plan tonight that will never fail.

[20 : 40] A plan to put your trust in the promised Saviour King Jesus. The promised King who will save us from our sins.

Thank you. Thank you.