

Bah Humbug - Surviving the Most Wonderful Time of the Year

Have you noticed how everything now comes with a warning label? We slap those yellow and black stickers on everything. What amazes me about a good many of these labels is how unnecessary so many of them are. You read some of these labels and think, "What kind of idiot would ever do that?" Aaaaannnd that's when you remember that the world is full of idiots...and smart lawyers. You know that warning label is there because somewhere there was a stupendously stupid person who did that very thing. And they sued over it. And the company lost. And now you have this warning label.

Here are some of my favorites.

- Danger. Do not hold the wrong end of a chainsaw.
- Jabra Drive 'N' Talk Bluetooth ear piece for your phone: "Never operate your speakerphone while driving.
- On a box of Nytol sleeping pills: "May cause drowsiness."
- On the gas cap for an ATV: "Never use a lit match or open flame to check fuel level."
- On a box of eggs: "This product may contain eggs."
- On a baby stroller: "Remove child before folding."
- Clothes iron: "Do not iron clothes on body."
- Midol Menstrual Complete medicine for menstrual cramps. "Ask doctor before use if you have difficulty urinating due to an enlarged prostate."

But do you know what should come with a warning label? The Holidays. Christmas is supposed to be the most wonderful time of the year. The family. The friends. The food. The festivities. The beauty. The memories. The chance to get closer to God.

Despite all the songs and sentiment to the contrary, the truth is that Christmas rarely works out that way. Christmas has a way of frazzling our nerves and not living up to our expectations. No matter what speed at which we live the rest of our lives for about five weeks we have to kick it up a couple of extra levels. There are presents to buy, cards to send, decorations to adorn, a tree to put up, family pictures to be taken, school pageants to go to, parties to attend, more presents to buy, food to prepare, that toilet that needs fixed before the company comes, and you haven't even cleaned the gutters yet from the fall. You have a cousin who's an antivax crusader and an aunt who's on a mission to make everyone gets the jab. What happens when you get them in the same room together? Plans fall apart, hopes are dashed, and the best intentions fall to the side.

It's enough to make a scrooge out of the best of us. Getting closer to God can be an impossibility. Rates of depression and suicide are at their highest this time of the year. So what will our response be? We can gripe, groan, and grouse our way until January, or perhaps we can change our attitude and approach just a bit and maybe we can do more than just survive the

most wonderful time of the year. Maybe we can even find a little wonder.

So how can we better approach the next month to get the most out of Christmas without it getting the most out of us? Interestingly enough, the very first Christmas had its share of unexpected twists and turns.

Matthew 1:18-25

18 This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. [19] Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. 20 But after he had considered this, 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. [21] She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: [23] "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" --which means, "God with us." 24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. [25] But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Let's see. An unplanned pregnancy. An unmarried teenage mother. The threat of public disgrace, visions of angels, a divine calling, and when we add to that a government mandate to journey from their home in northern Galilee to southern Judea in the ninth month of pregnancy for what amounts to a tax increase and the only place to stay is in a barn you could say the first Christmas was not a Hallmark Christmas.

We can benefit from Joseph's and Mary's experience. Let's look at two survival tips that can help us get through the most wonderful time of the year.

The first survival tip that can help us get through the most wonderful time of year is...

I. Expect the Unexpected. (vv:18)

Expect the unexpected. Plan for the unplanned. Do not be surprised by surprises, because they will happen. The store will be out of what you want. The decorations won't match your pattern. You will get to the school play late. The company will arrive early. The pie will be overcooked and the stuffing will be underdone. We need to accept right from the get go- things will not go according to plan.

Joseph & Mary had been planning a wedding until God told them to prepare a nursery. Joseph was planning on marrying his sweetheart, drawing up house plans, carving their marriage bed...BIG PLANS. Mary was planning an elaborate wedding, picking out china patterns, looking for the perfect lingerie for the honeymoon...BIG PLANS. Can you imagine a 15 year old Mary going to her 20 something fiancée and Joseph starts talking about floor plans and wall

color...Mary says, "Joe, honey, we need to talk....I'm pregnant." Short of dismemberment or death...very few of us will have holiday plans interrupted as much as Joseph and Mary!

So what do we do when life throws an unexpected surprise at us in the middle of our special Christmas? Panic, scream, kick the dog, yell at the kids, do some more shopping? No, first we need to realize...

A. Our Schedule is Not God's Schedule

God's schedule and our schedule are two different things. God has His plan and His purpose and He works it out according to His perfect wisdom and knowledge, and usually God's calendar is not the same as ours. That's why the Lord's prayer says, "*Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,*" not "My will be done in heaven as it is on earth." If God upset Joseph and Mary's wedding plans, realize that your Christmas plans are fair game for God too.

We can make plans on top of plans on top of plans....our plans may not be what God has planned for us. The very first year we were married we had planned a big Christmas at her grandparents in Texas.

This was her traditional family Christmas. This was the Christmas she had known since she was a little girl, and she was excited to share it with me. The whole family was going to be there.

Then just a few days before Christmas a long-time member of the church passed away. There were 4 generations of this family in our congregation. The funeral was scheduled for Christmas Eve. Teresa and I had one car at the time and I sent her on to her folks in OK to travel to TX. I was going to be stuck all by myself in the middle of nowhere Kansas on Christmas.

Your best laid plans are subject to interruption. No matter how hard you try, how careful you plan, or how hard you work, your plans can fall apart, or things can go wrong. You can let it spoil your whole Christmas. You can turn into the Grinch, or you can accept that God's schedule may be different. That means we have to realize something else as well...

B. Our Plans are Always Open to Change.

If God's schedule is not our schedule that means our plans are always open to change. Our calendars are never written in stone. It doesn't matter if it's written down on your refrigerator calendar, the shared family Google calendar, or you've tied a string around your finger, it is open to rescheduling by God.

James 4:13-15

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." [14] Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. [15] Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."

The Bible teaches that making good plans is wise, but it can be unhealthy when we begin to demand our way. When we see our plans as an inalienable right, when we begin to demand that they are honored, they can drive a wedge between you and God. Plans can become an idol like anything else. If Jesus is the Lord of your life, that means he is the Lord of your schedule and the lord of your plans, the lord of your expectations and the Lord of your calendar as well. That's why when we plan we say as James says, *"If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."*

All of our plans come with an "if" attached. Everybody's plans are conditional, but as Christians we understand and accept that up front. Anyway, when it comes to God's plans vs. our plans, honestly, whose plans do you think are better? Whose plans are going to work out in the long run?

The first survival tip we can learn from Mary and Joseph: **expect** and **accept** the unexpected, and we can do that when we do when we embrace these two fundamental truths: First, my schedule is not God's schedule, and second, My schedule is always open to God's changing it.

Mary and Joseph teach us a second survival tip that can help us get through the most wonderful time of the year...

II. Try to get God's take on the Unexpected.

If the unexpected happening means that God's schedule is different than ours, that must mean that He knows or understands something that we don't. God doesn't mess with our plans to be mean. God wants the best for us like a parent does a child. I don't go around messing with my daughters plans unless I know or understand something they don't. I know that something else will benefit them in the long run, or I know that what they planned may be ultimately harmful. Or maybe I just have something better in mind.

So when God, in His perfect plan, allows our plans to be overturned, we need to try to get God's take on the situation. What does he know that we don't? What's the better thing that He has in store? Mary and Joseph were able to get God's take on the unexpected and it made all of the difference.

Joseph just about blew this one. His knee-jerk reaction was to divorce Mary. Instead, Joseph got God's take on the matter! He allowed God to change his plans and he went along with it. Look at our text. Who named Jesus? (Joseph!) That shows he accepted the unexpected in his life. I'm sure glad Joseph got it! 2 things happened in his life because he got it 1.) He got to marry his sweetheart. 2.) He was honored to have been chosen to raise God's Son.

Joseph did have the benefit of seeing an angel in a vision. God's take won't usually come to us this clearly, but we can get it from other sources, but let's be honest this morning. How often do we even consider seeing God's hand in our interruptions? All we see are dashed plans, nixed ideas, disappointments, defeat, and failure. If we think of God at all it is to be mad at Him for

not protecting our plans.

But if God isn't going to send us an angel in a dream, how are we supposed to get God's take on the unexpected? Here are 3 words to help you gain perspective when your plans begin to fall apart.

A. PRAY: Stop & pray. Pray for courage, wisdom, guidance, help...JUST PRAY. Prayer has a way of changing our whole focus and direction. Prayer opens us up to new possibilities. James 5:13 says, *"Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray."* 1 Thess 5:16-18 says, *"Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."*

B. PERSPECTIVE: Put the interruption in proper perspective. How bad is it really? Lots of us tend to be catastrophic in our thinking. We spend \$100 worth of worry on a \$5 problem. Ask yourself, "Will this really matter next week, next month, or next year." Anyway, it is the unplanned, the accidents, the interruptions, the holiday oops that sometimes become our greatest memories.

I remember when I was in Junior High or so, my cousins and I started playing catch with some Jello blocks grandma had made. We started off in the living room and then we began to spread the distance to see how far we could get, and so one of us scoots further and further down the hall. A Jell-O block would fly. Take a step back. Another Jell-O block flies.

Well, eventually, one of those cherry red squares of sugary gelatin scraped my grandparents textured ceiling. The texture acted like Jell-O sandpaper so that it left a big long red streak down Grandma and Grandpa's living room ceiling.

We quickly acted like nothing happened. We made it all the way through Christmas lunch without our red streak of guilt ever being discovered. Grandpa never found it until much later when it had dried as hard as rock and became a permanent architectural feature. He was so livid. The red streak was there for years. It was still there when I lived with them for a year in college. We've gotten so much mileage out of that story over the years. So many laughs. I don't know if Grandpa can look down from heaven and see us laughing, but if so, I imagine he's laughing with us.

So when plans fall apart take yourself out of the moment and get some perspective. See the big picture. If your tub doesn't get scrubbed before company comes over, it's not the end of the world. If the pie doesn't get made, or all the kids can't make it, it's okay. Jesus assures us in Luke 12:22-24, *"Do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes."*

C. PROVIDENCE: God is in control. He still has your hairs numbered. There is nothing you will face this Christmas that will come as a surprise to God. What is unexpected for us is already included in God's plan. So when our plans fall apart, we've got to trust that this was already

included in God's plans, so He must have a way of facing it or dealing with it. Nothing can happen to you without God knowing it. So trust that God knows what He is doing even if you don't.

Getting God's take on the unexpected is so much better than knee-jerk reactions. Knee-jerk reactions lack the information to make good decisions. Knee jerk reactions usually make things worse.

Mrs. Monroe had nine children, one day she came home from the grocery store and found the house as it usually was...only quieter. She looked in the living room and saw five of her children sitting in a circle. She put down her groceries and went to get a closer look. Her five adorable children were playing with 5 of the cutest little skunks you've ever seen! Mrs. Monroe yelled, "RUN CHILDREN, RUN!" Each child grabbed a skunk and ran in five different directions. She yelled in such a panic stricken tone and scared the kids so much they squeezed their skunks. Skunks don't like to be squeezed.

When the unexpected happens this Christmas, when your plans are dashed you gotta be careful. Don't react with just your feelings and emotions. If you do you have the great potential to squeeze the skunk.

Conclusion:

Our life doesn't always go as expected. Chances are your perfect Christmas plans will have some unexpected twists and turns. We've looked at two survival tips that can help us get through the most wonderful time of the year.

First, expect the unexpected. Second, get God's take on the unexpected. When God disrupts your plans, He's trying to accomplish His. I hope you'll see dashed Christmas plans as an opportunity for spiritual growth. When the unexpected happens you have two choices? 1.) You could let the unexpected anger, get you down, keep you miserable.....or 2.) Realize that God is working his plan when he interrupts your plan.

In *A View from the Zoo*, Gary Richmond tells about the birth of a giraffe:

The first things to emerge are the baby giraffe's front hooves and head. A few minutes later the plucky newborn is hurled forth, falls ten feet, and lands on its back. Within seconds, he rolls to an upright position with his legs tucked under his body.

From this position he considers the world for the first time and shakes himself. The mother giraffe lowers her head long enough to take a quick look. Then she positions herself directly over the calf. She waits for about a minute, then she does the most unreasonable thing. She swings her long, pendulous leg outward and kicks her baby, so that it is sent sprawling head over heels.

When it doesn't get up, the violent process is repeated over and over again. The struggle to rise

is momentous. As the baby calf grows tired, the mother kicks it again to stimulate its efforts....Finally, the calf stands for the first time on its wobbly legs. Then the mother giraffe does the most remarkable thing. She kicks it off its feet again. Why? She wants it to remember how it got up! In the wild, baby giraffes must be able to get up as quickly as possible to stay with the herd, where there is safety. Lions, hyenas, leopards, and wild hunting dogs all enjoy young giraffes, and they'd get it too, if the mother didn't teach her calf to get up quickly and get on with it!

Romans 8:28

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.