



PERFECT TIMING

*Jeff Peabody
New Day Church
Federal Way, WA
December 21st, 2008*

It's been so wintery outside that I think I'd like to start off with a summer story. Think back to August, when days were longer and temperatures were warmer. All eyes were on Beijing for the 2008 Summer Olympics. We'll always remember names like Michael Phelps, Shawn Johnson, Nastia Lukin. But the man who had the greatest influence on what we saw of the Olympics was somebody wenever saw on the screen -- a man named Dick Ebersol from NBC.

Clear back in September of 2000, when the games were in Sydney, Australia, viewership was way down. NBC was losing money and not happy. The president of the International Olympic Committee asked Ebersol what he could do to help. Ebersol said, "Well, there's nothing for these games, but in 2008, could you ask China to move the start of the game back four weeks?" The September time frame had meant the Olympics had to compete with back to school bed times and football games on TV.

China agreed to his request and bumped the entire games back to August. Then in 2005, before any events were even planned out on paper, Ebersol went to the Olympic committee and asked them to schedule the swimming and gymnastics finals in the morning, China time, so that they could be broadcast live in prime time slots in the United States. Normally, the finals are held later in the day. Again, Ebersol got his wish. Then he went to Michael Phelps and got him on board, making sure the morning races wouldn't hurt his chances of winning. Once he had a star athlete backing him, he then could sell the idea to other countries who weren't sure morning finals were the best for their swimmers. In the end, Ebersol won the day.

When the Olympics finally arrived, their timing coincided with the highest gas prices in U.S. history, which meant more people were staying home from vacations and watching the Olympics than would normally have tuned in. So all the timing lined up perfectly to make the 2008 Summer Olympics a television ratings triumph, with more than 200 million viewers.

It's fascinating to me to hear the details of what was going on for so long behind the scenes. I am in awe of minds that can work that far ahead, precisely planning and negotiating every last detail -- all for a few hours of TV that would be shown once and

mostly forgotten by the middle of December. Getting the timing just right required an incredible amount of foresight and vision and negotiation.

As I have gone back and read different portions of the Christmas story this month, I've been struck by how many references there are to timing. The timing of the census. The appearance of the star. The sequence of events was far more orchestrated than any Olympics TV coverage. God was incredibly precise in the "when" of Christmas. Which is strange, because to me, many of the things that happened look like terrible timing. I never would have chosen to arrange things the way God did. So I consider timing to be one of the great "wonders" of Christmas. Why did God do what he did when he did it?

Do you ever wonder about God's timing in your own life, why he lets things happen when they do? I was talking with somebody this week who has weathered one crisis after another after another, and she said, "I've learned to quit saying, 'well, at least nothing worse could happen.'" Sometimes we want to go, "Lord, I know you know what you're doing, but this sure seems like the wrong time for me to have to deal with this."

We tend to put more trust in God's timing when we see something go incredibly well for us. I heard a radio announcer talking about how God had really watched out for him when his car slid on the ice this week, because no cars were coming through the intersection at that time. We're quicker to give God glory when we see everything going like clockwork. I've heard people who are thrilled because God helped their house sell when it was best for them. I've heard people praise God for opening a door to a new job just as an old one was ending. In those kinds of cases, it's easy to believe God had a hand in making things happen in an unusual way.

And I'm not discrediting those situations. I think God is in charge of ALL timing, and we should take as many opportunities as we can to give him credit. But I think we're less likely to see his hand and believe he's in control when things aren't going according to our timetable, when the house doesn't sell for months and the employers aren't answering your calls. Is God still just as involved in those circumstances as he is in the more pleasant ones?

Ordinarily, we would think when God puts great care into planning anything, it will be evident because it will go smoothly and easily. But when we take a closer look at Jesus' birth, we see a time when God was deeply concerned about how and when things unfolded, and yet nothing was smooth and easy. It's a great opportunity for us to think a little more deeply about what it means to trust that God's timing is perfect.

I'd like to look at just one very familiar part of the story with you this morning, but from a different angle than normal. I want to consider the whole question of God's timing, because I think there are truths we can discover here that translate into our experience of God's timing today.

Matt 1:18-25

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. 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.

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. 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."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"-which means, "God with us."

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

The timing word I'd like us to consider in this section came in the very first paragraph, when Matthew says this all took place "BEFORE they came together," meaning before Mary and Joseph consummated their marriage. Matthew is pointing out that Joseph had nothing to do with this pregnancy. And here God sends a baby BEFORE there is a marriage union.

God's perfect timing rarely matches ours.

Nobody's ever ready for a baby, but I'm sure Mary and Joseph were especially unprepared. They weren't even living in the same house! All their wedding plans would need to change. Everything they had in mind for their future just went out the window.

Humanly speaking, the timing is terrible. It's a bride and groom's worst nightmare. Yet God was looking at things from a different perspective and knew this was exactly the right time for Jesus to be born.

The way God thinks about schedules is so different from the way we think about them. Years ago, Karin's Great Aunt Ruby was a missionary in India. The Indian government ended up kicking out all the missionaries, so she had to move back home to Saskatchewan, Canada. Right away, she knew that she was being called to go to Africa. She had all the details planned out of what she would do and who she would work with. She was ready to leave. But for some reason, she could not get clearance to leave Canada. No matter how hard she tried, her travel plans were stalled. For two whole years she was frustrated, and she couldn't figure out why God would make her wait so long when he clearly had a plan for where she was to go next.

Finally, everything was cleared up and she left for Cameroon where she served for many years as a midwife. She never quite understood what that gap in time had been about.

But then, when she retired from her missionary work and was ready to again go back to Canada, she made an amazing discovery. In order to qualify for Canada's equivalent of Social Security, she had needed to be a resident for those two critical years. Otherwise, she wouldn't have qualified for a penny. And as a poor missionary with no other real savings for retirement, that money was critical to her survival. God knew just what he was doing when he delayed her move to Africa all those years prior.

We don't always get the satisfaction of seeing the reasons that clearly. But God has far more in mind than we can comprehend when he maps out the times.

Psalm 75:2

You say, "I choose the appointed time; it is I who judge uprightly.

My own sense of perfect timing is skewed and partial. God is the one who judges uprightly, who sees objectively and makes the best decisions when it comes to timing.

Mary and Joseph had no way of knowing where God was going with this interruption in their plans. Let's think for a minute about just how radical the news of Mary's pregnancy was. First of all, God is the one who invented sex and the whole baby making process. He's stepping outside the biological process he invented.

He also came up with the rules about keeping sex for marriage. God's own law made it a serious offense for people who weren't married to sleep together. In Israel, it was a capital crime, and God was the one who established the ground rules. No fooling around.

Now here we have two people who have been good about keeping God's law. Joseph is described as a righteous man. He and Mary have had a pure relationship. They are saving themselves until the wedding. But look what's happening: God is doing something that is going to make it look like they broke a command.

Can you imagine how people will react when they hear the news that Mary is pregnant and Mary and Joseph try to explain about the angels? "Yeah. Sure, Joseph. A virgin birth. Wink wink. If that's your story, you stick to it, buddy." There would be no escaping the rumors in a small town like Nazareth.

Joseph was no dummy. He knew how Mary would be treated. He was sure this was going to mean public shame and disgrace for her. An unwed mother would wear that label for life. To his credit, he was trying to think of a way to minimize the scandal, to deal with it privately and quietly,

But if he married her, people would be sure he was the father. It wouldn't just be her reputation on the line – it would be his as well. Couldn't God have waited just a few more months? Then there wouldn't have been any scandal. As it stands, there is no way around it. He's going to have to make some decisions.

God's perfect timing often creates a crisis.

What is a crisis? The original Greek word means *decision*. It is a crucial moment, a turning point. God is very good at creating these moments, bringing us to a place where we have to choose a direction. Joseph has to dig deep and examine what is driving him and which voice he's going to listen to.

The thing about a crisis is that it is never planned by us. Often it is uncomfortable and unpleasant. It's like when you accidentally sit on the remote on the couch. There's an object that is prodding you to move. You can't relax right where you are. Unless you're me – then your laziness might fight you and make you wait until your whole leg has fallen asleep before you do anything about that remote.

We can do that with a crisis. Since it is uncomfortable and requires action, we resist it. We don't just naturally go along with God's timing.

Joseph had two things he was struggling with that could have prevented him from accepting God's plan. The first was **unmet expectations**. It was not Joseph's dream to marry a girl who was pregnant with someone else's baby, which is how it looked and felt. It was not his dream to have all his friends and family assume he was the father. That made it extra difficult: He had to manage the expectations of other people as well as his own. And any way you looked at it, this development didn't match what anyone had hoped for. This was not the life he had planned.

The other thing Joseph had to battle was **fear**. The angel told him to not be afraid, specifically, afraid of the ramifications of marrying Mary. He had to have been worried about what other people would think. There would be fears that maybe he had made the wrong choice, or been too forgiving. After Joseph had the vision of the angel, I'm sure new fears arose as well -- fears about raising the Son of God in his house. Would he even begin to be up to such a task?

Expectations and fear. Those are two of our biggest obstacles to accepting God's timing as well. For me personally, I find that expectations are a huge part of how I perceive events. Elliott Larson once said, "Anger always comes from frustrated expectations." We have ideas in our head of how our life should go or even just how our day should go, and then something happens to interfere. So we're upset and disappointed. We get stuck in a place of resentment and frustration and bitterness because our own timing didn't work out. We don't think of it as God having different timing or a different plan – all we see is a roadblock in the way of our own plans.

In one of his books, Philip Yancey gives a great example from his own life of the way this looks:

Disappointment with God does not come only in dramatic circumstances. For me, it also edges unexpectedly into the mundaneness of everyday life. I remember one night last winter, a cold, raw Chicago night. The wind was howling, and sleet slanted out of the skies, coating the streets with darkly shining ice. That night my car stalled in a rather

ominous neighborhood. As I raised the hood and hunched over the engine, the sleet stinging my back like tiny pebbles, I prayed over and over, Please help me get this car started.

No amount of fiddling with wires and tubes and cables would start the car, and so I spent the next hour in a dilapidated diner waiting for a tow truck. Sitting on a plastic chair, my drenched clothes forming a widening pool of water around me, I wondered what God thought about my plight. I would miss a scheduled meeting that night and would probably waste many hours over the next few days trying to wring fair, honest work out of a service station set up to prey upon stranded motorists. Did God even care about my frustration or the waste of energy and money?

It seems petty and selfish, maybe even stupid, to pray for a car to start. But I have found that petty disappointments tend to accumulate over time, undermining my faith with a lava flow of doubt. I start to wonder whether God cares about everyday details-about me. I am tempted to pray less often, having concluded in advance that it won't matter. Or will it? My emotions and my faith waver. Once those doubts seep in, I am even less prepared for times of major crisis.

Can you relate to scenarios like that? Half the time our worst battles are not because something is terribly difficult as much as it is so far from what we had in mind to be doing or experiencing at a given time.

Are you struggling today with unfulfilled expectations? Your career isn't what you wanted, your spouse isn't acting the way you wanted, your bank account doesn't look the way you wanted, your day isn't going the way you wanted...Embracing God's timing may mean letting go of your own sense of how things SHOULD have been. It feels like a loss of control, though we are powerless many times to change our circumstances. But there's deep comfort in giving control to the only one who DOES have power over your situation. The only word for it is peace.

Our expectations aren't the only barriers that make us want to resist God's timing: Fear is also pretty good at it. We may sense God's tug on us to do something but hesitate because his plan intimidates us. Like Mary and Joseph, his timing comes before we feel prepared, before we feel ready.

I've told this story so often you're probably sick of it, but when we were thinking about starting a church, I sat on the paperwork to get the ball rolling for over a year. My stomach would get all in knots every time I sat down to fill it out. I was full of fear that I wasn't ready. I wasn't mature enough. I didn't know enough. I wasn't at the right place in my job to make the jump. And I'm sure in many ways all my fears were justified.

But I think it's kind of like sword making. Let's say you're a knight in medieval times and you need a new sword. So you go to the swordsmith and put in your order. He tells you it's going to be a long involved process from start to finish, so to be patient. After a few days, you're getting antsy to get to a battle somewhere, so you go back to check on

his progress and you see your sword. The basic shape is there. You grab it and are about to head out the door, but he stops you and tells you it isn't usable yet. It's not ready. You say okay and start to put it up on the shelf. You figure maybe it needs to age longer or something. But he grabs it from you, and he takes that unfinished sword and sticks it right into this incredibly hot furnace. It turns out the sword needed to be tempered in the flames to harden it and make it battle ready. He pounds on it and grinds it and polishes it. It is that forging process itself that makes the sword ready – not more time going by.

When we say we're not ready, sometimes we think we need more time or to take a few more classes or grow up a bit more somehow. But maybe what we need is to be put straight into a furnace where we can be forged. Maybe the next step we're afraid of is part of God's plan to keep shaping us and fitting us for battle. I love Paul's advice to Timothy:

2 Timothy 4:2

Be prepared in season and out of season.

In other words, be ready whether you think it's good timing or bad timing. What does it mean to be ready? Mostly, I think it means being ready to say yes to what God is asking, even if it's frightening.

It would have been very easy for Joseph to rationalize saying no. I'm not qualified. I've never been a dad before. I wouldn't know how to explain this choice to people. I'm just a carpenter – I'm no expert on miracles and salvation and God stuff.

But one of my favorite lines in the Bible is Joseph's response. Luke tells us what Joseph did after having the vision:

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.

No hesitation. No praying about it or thinking it over. He doesn't even give some verbal response to the angel. He just gets up the very next morning and does what God asked, in spite of all his fears and in spite of any disappointment he may have felt over unmet expectations.

What is God asking of you right now? Maybe it is forgiving someone. Telling someone trustworthy about your private struggle. Saying no to something other people want you to do. Committing to trust and pray when you're afraid.

Is there something about it that scares you, that makes you want to say no? What makes you feel unready? Maybe this is a furnace that will temper and toughen you. Maybe the doing of it is what will grow you and prepare you more than anything else. Are you ready to say yes – yes in spite of how I feel, yes even though it scares me, yes because I know it's you who's doing the asking.

So far, we've said God's perfect timing rarely lines up with ours and that it often creates a crisis. Those aren't exactly the most comforting of concepts. So now let me balance those truths with two that ARE a comfort. First, **God's perfect timing always furthers his purposes.**

Look again at why Luke said God brought this news Joseph and Mary:

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"-which means, "God with us."

When you look at the scope of what God was doing, you start to see that the inconvenience, the scandal, the unexpected nature of this whole pregnancy were pretty short lived in the scheme of things. This birth was fulfilling ancient, ancient prophecies. This was bigger than either Mary or Joseph's individual lives. Way bigger.

The Haake's gave us a copy of the video The Star of Bethlehem. It's a documentary by a man named Rick Larson. He has done all this research and created this amazing video that recreates the night sky back at the time of Jesus' birth. Thanks to modern software and mathematical calculations, we can literally see what the wise men would have seen in the sky, and it is truly breath taking.

But what's even more mind-blowing is that if his theory of what happened is true, the star wasn't some miraculous, unnatural occurrence: it was pre-planned to coincide with Christ's birth since creation itself. Rick says this:

From the very instant at which God flung the universe into existence, he also knew the moment he would enter human history in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He marked it in the stars. And from before the beginning of time as we experience it, God knew the very moment when Messiah would breath his last on the cross.

What an awesome concept to take in – that God knew exactly how the stars and planets would align thousands of years ahead of time, and he used them to accomplish his purposes.

It's good for me to realize that God's agenda is so much larger than my own, because it helps me see that he has a different perspective on the events of my life. What he is doing in my life is about more than just me. I'm not the center of the story, no matter how much I'd like to be.

That's only comforting if God's purposes are good. And thankfully, he's stated plainly that they are. I like how The Message version translates Jeremiah 29:11:

Jeremiah 29:11

I know what I'm doing. I have it all planned out — plans to take care of you, not abandon you, plans to give you the future you hope for.

My sister Jana got in a conversation last week with a man who had been through a divorce a few years back and then went through a horrible car accident that took years of painful recovery. He told my sister he felt like everything that was happening was God's way of punishing him for failing in his marriage.

Jana has often felt that same way. When her youngest child died, she felt God was somehow punishing her for loving her kids too much. When a situation blew up at her church, she felt God might be punishing her for placing too much of her identity in her ministry there. But she has learned that God doesn't operate that way, because Jesus took all our punishment. And now, even though she is going through a rough health crisis of her own, she was able to say to that man, "You know, I used to feel like God was punishing me, too. But he's not like that. His grace is so much bigger than anything we do."

God's purposes for you are to prosper you and not to harm you, to give you a hope and a future. His intervention in your life is not with the intention of making you miserable. We can trust God's timing because his purposes are good. We can trust that God is good.

From Joseph's situation, I think we can gather two important things about God's purpose and timing. First, he's always moving toward **restoration**. The angel told Joseph that Jesus would save people from their sins. He would fix the long-standing break in the relationship between humanity and God. That included Joseph and Mary's sins, as well as those of everybody else. The point of this unusual birth was to mark the moment in a significant way because God was doing something far more profound.

Whether you're talking about individuals or groups, God's purpose is always about that idea of restoration or redemption. His timing of events in our lives will coincide in some way, big or small with his over-arching plan to rescue and restore.

Romans 5:6-7

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

God picked just the right time for Christ to come, and he picks just the right time to take what he did and apply it further and further in our lives.

The second thing the angel pointed out to Joseph was that this birth would bring home the fact that God is in the business of revealing his **presence**. Jesus would be called Immanuel – God with us. He would be the proof that God hadn't abandoned his people.

I still see that as being one of God's purposes in our lives – making us aware of his presence with us. You don't have to be alone. God cares about the details of our lives enough to be involved in them.

When we know that all of God's activity in our lives is focused on making us whole people again who are in relationship with him, then it helps us trust him with control.

He's working for our best. In fact, although we have ideas about what we think would be good for us,

God's perfect timing never fails to be better.

The best plans we can come up with are nothing compared to God's.

Ecclesiastes 3:11

He has made everything beautiful in its time.

God is going for beautiful! He's not content to see you settle for average existence. He has much bigger plans than that.

Imagine if Joseph had ignored the vision and followed his initial instinct to break up with Mary. He could have found some other bride who matched his ideal. They probably would have lived a fine, normal life. But by obeying, he traded normal for amazing. He gave up traditional and got incredible instead. He sacrificed the expected and gained the exceptional.

Following God may take courage, but it isn't as though it's not rewarded. The more we follow, the more whole we become and the more we know of God's presence, and that has to have an effect.

In his book, *Finding God*, Larry Crabb describes a time when he got some unexpectedly bad financial news. He writes,

Through a series of miscalculations, I owed a great deal of money when I thought some was coming in. I've received far worse news before, but this became an instant symbol for all that I was clinging to in life and for my determined efforts to keep my life in order. After five minutes of controlled panic, I knew that God was holding out to me the opportunity to take the next step – a big one – in my spiritual journey. The message from God seemed clear. "You cannot control your life. You are therefore free. You are not trapped by the need to arrange things as you want. Trust me more fully than you ever have before. Do what I am leading you to do, even though the risks from your perspective are enormous. I am thoroughly good, and I am good enough to trust thoroughly."

I am making plans right now to take the step that God has placed before me. I've already taken it in my heart. Panic is giving way to the terror of trust. A quiet sense of adventure – almost a thrill – is replacing the despairing boredom.

Are you feeling that kind of freedom this morning? Trusting God's timing and especially trusting his goodness is what releases us from the need to be in control, the need to worry, the need to manipulate events and force things to happen.

So the question is this:

What unmet expectations are frustrating me this morning?

Tell Jesus about it. O. Hallesby says that prayer is just letting Jesus in. Talk to him about what is frustrating you and standing in your way today.

What is the step of obedience God is asking me to take?

The message of the angel was to not be afraid. God has prepared you for everything he's asking of you.

God would like to bring Christ into your life in new ways, just as he did for Joseph and Mary. It will not look like you would think. It will not feel the way you want it to. But it will do more to restore you and give you hope and a future than anything else. God is with us, and he is making everything beautiful in his perfect timing.