

The Great Rescue

(Slide one) When I was a kid, this (*hold up book*) was one of my favourite picture books. It's called *A Tale of Two Princes*, by Eckart Zur Nieden. It tells the story of a group of people who lived on a beautiful island. They had a king who they loved, and who loved them. He gave them good laws so they knew what to do and how to behave, and how to always be happy.

The king helped make their island beautiful, and gave them these laws, and then sailed home across the sea. He put a governor in charge who would help the people remember the king and his good laws.

And the people loved the king. They built a statue of him, and once a year they loaded up a ship with all the very best things from their farms and bakeries and fishing nets and sent them across the sea to their king.

(Slide two) Then one day, the governor went for a walk in the woods, and he heard a voice. It was a voice he had never heard before. The voice said that *he* was the prince of the island! The governor was amazed. *The prince?* He asked?

"Yes," said the voice, "and I have a suggestion for you. Why don't you stop honouring the king? After all, he's so far away. Knock down his statue! Forget about his laws! And don't send him that ship-load of riches every year. Keep those good things! Store them up for yourselves! After all, you may need them someday when hard times come."

The governor was amazed. He couldn't imagine being so ungrateful to the king. But when he protested, the voice said no more, and the governor went away.

And do you know what the governor did?

He listened to the voice.

(slide three) When it came time to fill the next ship of all the good things the people were going to send to the king, the governor told two dockworkers, in a quiet voice, to set aside two sacks of hazelnuts and put them in the governor's barn.

So the dockworkers did just that. And then, they told some of the other dockworkers... "the governor is taking some of the king's riches for HIMSELF!"

And do you know what happened next?

The sailors and dockworkers came back to the ship that night and took some of the riches for *themselves*.

They were seen by a farmer. Who told another farmer. So they went to the ship early the next morning to take what *they* wanted, but the ship had been sunk, and all the riches were gone!

(slide four) Soon the fishermen got wind of it. And just like the farmers, they wanted their share! So they and the farmers stormed the houses of the dockworkers and sailors and took what they wanted. And in all the chaos, the king's statue was tipped over and fell into the harbor.

So in only a night and a day, the people of the island had forgotten how to behave and how to be happy. Now they were always being hateful. They were always scolding or complaining. Everyone was angry, and everyone was afraid.

And no one talked about the king anymore. And no one remembered his good laws.

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The people on this island make me think of the people of God. In the beginning, their king – God – created a beautiful world for them to live

in. And he gave them laws, like the 10 commandments, that would help them live good, happy lives.

And some times the people loved God. They loved their king! They worshiped him in the temple and obeyed his laws and were kind to each other.

But from the very beginning, God's people also listened to the voice of someone who wasn't God. Adam and Eve listened to the serpent, who told them, "Did God *really* say you couldn't eat from any tree in the garden? I think you should take the fruit from the tree in the middle, so you will be like God!"

And Adam and Eve listened to the serpent. They ate from the tree in the middle of the garden, turning their backs on God, on the king who had given them every good thing.

And God's people kept turning their backs on God. They kept listening to the voice of the evil one, the one who convinced the people that he could give them more than God would, that he would make them happy and strong and rich. So the people of Israel stopped worshipping God, and forgot about God, and became greedy, and treated people unkindly.

Sometimes God's people would remember God, and would say "sorry" and would once more worship him and love him and love others. But then they would hear the voice of the evil one saying, "Does God *really* love you? Forget about God. He's not here, after all. He's far, far away. Just love yourself and live for yourself instead."

And so time and time again, the people of Israel forgot about God, and turned away from God, and lived just for themselves.

We do this too, sometimes, don't we? Sometimes its hard to remember to love God, and worship God. There are so many other things trying to

get our attention, or tell us who we are, or what we should do to be happy. “You don’t need God to be happy,” they say. “You need *us*.”

“You need cool clothes, and a good job, and you need to be powerful and strong, and you need to have money, and you need to be popular and well-liked. *Then* you’ll be happy.”

And so we spend all our time and energy trying to get all these things, trying to be happy. And we forget all about God, and we live just for ourselves.

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And then, sometimes, we get a wake-up call.

God sent people called prophets to the people of Israel to wake them up! To tell them that they weren’t acting the way he created them to, and that this behaviour would only lead to bad things.

One such prophet was named Zephaniah. His prophecy isn’t very long – just three chapters in the Bible. But he packs a punch with his prophecy. In the first two chapters he tells the Israelites that destruction is coming, that the Babylonians are going to destroy the temple and the city of Jerusalem and take many, many people in exile, into captivity.

And that’s exactly what happens. The people are taken captive and brought to Babylon, where they have to serve a foreign king, and learn new ways of being. They feel far away from God. They feel like they’re in the dark, and they can’t see a way out.

In the Old Testament, God led the people into exile. But sometimes *we* are the ones who distance ourselves from God. We put *ourselves* in exile.

(slide five) In the story of the people on the island, the governor knows he has to do something to fix all the problems he's caused. He goes back into the woods, and shouts for the prince, telling the prince that everything was his fault, and demanding to know what they were supposed to do!

The voice of the prince speaks to him from the darkness and says, "You were the one who decided to act on my suggestions. And now, think about this – the king hasn't heard from you for a long time and is surely angry. Very soon he'll come and punish you severely! But I know how you can save yourself. Just pull aside this branch and you'll see a secret doorway. This is where I live, in a huge cave big enough for all of you. Come join me. I'll keep you safe."

(slide six) So the people all journey down into the cave. It's a dark cave, and damp, and cold. The people are scared, and they call for the prince, but all they hear...is silence.

Sometimes, when we know we've done something wrong, we want to hide from God. Just like Adam and Eve wanted to hide when they ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. We feel ashamed, and embarrassed, and we're afraid of God. We don't want to face God, because then we have to face what we've done. That we've treated people unkindly, or been greedy, or selfish, or prideful. That we've yelled at people who love us, or lied to people, or taken what isn't ours.

We feel ashamed. And so we try to hide. We ignore God – we ignore the thing we've done. Because we think that if God finds out what it is we've done, he'll punish us. We think something bad will happen. We think that God will love us less. And as we hide, we feel very alone.

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The people in the cave felt alone. Because it was so dark they never knew if it was day or night. They felt very sorry for the things they had done. They cried and tried to sleep and felt very unhappy.

And then someone whispered, “I see a light!”

The light grew brighter, and then stopped. The people heard the sound of fighting, the clash and clang of weapons, shouts and groans.

Then the noise stopped, and once more the light grew brighter and brighter, until a man came and stood in the circle of people, holding a torch. (slide seven) He was limping – his heel was bleeding.

And do you know what this man said?

“Don’t be afraid. I’ve come to take you out of this place. I am the king’s son. My father forgives all of the wrong things you did. I defeated the underground prince – he can never keep you in darkness again. I’ve found you now, and you are safe, and you can follow me home.”

When Zephaniah told the people that they’d be taken captive, that wasn’t the only thing he said. He didn’t stop there. At the very end of his prophecy, he gives the people words of hope.

“Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart. The Lord has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm. The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.”

God was going to rescue his people. He would lead them back home. And he wouldn’t be angry with them anymore, he wouldn’t punish them, he wouldn’t be waiting for them at the front doors, hands on his hips, big frown on his face.

He would rejoice over them with singing. He would gather his people in his arms, and sing, “You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.”

And that’s just what God did. He brought the people home, back to their houses, back to Jerusalem. But that isn’t all he did. God wanted to make sure, once and for all, that the prince of evil could never keep his people in darkness again.

So he sent his son into the world, into the darkness, to defeat the prince of evil.

This is what we celebrate at Christmas. That Jesus, the Son of God, came into the world. The rescuer arrived! And at Easter, we celebrate that Jesus defeated the prince of evil. By dying on the cross, and then rising again, Jesus defeated the power of darkness and death, the power that tries to keep us away from God. Because of Jesus’ sacrifice, we have no reason to fear. God, our king, forgives us. And will always forgive us when we say “sorry” for whatever bad thing we do. Because he loves us. He delights over us with singing.

And so Jesus is the answer to the promise that God made to the serpent long, long ago, after he tricked Adam and Eve, when God said, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”

And Jesus is the answer to the promise that God made the people of Israel when they were in exile. Jesus is the mighty warrior, the Good shepherd, the great rescuer.

And Jesus is our answer. When we’ve messed up, and feel ashamed, and want to hide from God, Jesus says, “You don’t have to hide. Because of me, you will always be forgiven. God never stops loving you. I will bring you home.”

And all of this we celebrate on Christmas. We celebrate that the Son of God came into the world to rescue God's people – to rescue us. Just like the prince in the story.

But unlike *that* story, we celebrate because the story of Christmas is *true!* God really entered our world, and really loves us. And one day Jesus will come again, and we will live with him forever.

We celebrate – we rejoice and sing – because God rejoices over us. And that's the best story ever told.

Would you pray with me?

Thank you God, that you never stop loving us.

Thank you that you sent your Son into the world to rescue us from the power of evil, from our own shame, from our fear.

When we've done something wrong, help us to turn to you, placing our trust in your love and forgiveness.

We love you, Jesus, our great rescuer.

Amen.