

[5 : 16] They lowered Robert back down to see how close he could get. He reached out for baby Jessica and was able to barely just get a hold of her, and when he started to pull, she screamed.

He paused. And that's when he heard a voice back up on ground level say, Pull hard, Robert! You may have to hurt her to save her.

And Robert grabbed baby Jessica as hard as he could, and he pulled. And he broke her toe, and he scraped her face, but he saved her life.

And that story captivated our nation, so much so that even President George Bush was elated that baby Jessica was alive.

Many of you remember that story, don't you? What was it about that story that gripped the nation? I'll tell you. It's because stories like Jessica's grip us.

[6 : 28] They draw us in because there is something beautiful about seeing an individual in danger, or even worse, in death, be rescued. And we see examples of this all the time, do we not?

We think about a firefighter bringing someone out of a burning building. We think about the people who devote their lives and time to the rescuing of animals. You think about the orphan that gets rescued from the orphanage, or maybe the teenage girl that gets rescued out of sex trafficking, or you think about someone who has been an addict for many years and is finally set free.

Whatever the situation is, there is something about a story of rescue that draws us in. Everybody lean in for just a moment.

That is exactly how we ought to think about Christmas. When you think about that manger, when you think about the incarnation of Jesus Christ, you need to remind yourself that that moment was a moment where a rescue mission was sent out.

And I realize that when we think about Christmas, mission isn't really the word that usually comes to mind. I mean, think of most of our Christmas messages, mine included. They tend to focus on the miraculous conception of Jesus, or they'll focus on some of the different characters that were involved in the Christmas story.

[7 : 58] What was it like for Mary? Or what was it like for Joseph? Or we'll meditate on Advent themes like hope, or peace, or joy, or love, all of which are important, all of which are true, but we must not forget that that manger was a missional act of God.

That manger, that night in Bethlehem, was a missional act of God. And why was the mission of the incarnation even necessary?

Why did God send His Son? Well, to answer that question, to answer the reason of why John 3.16, it would be helpful to go back in John 3.

One of the things we talk a lot about here at Faith Family is context matters. We don't want to just drop into John 3.16 and just, you know, quote it.

What does it actually mean? What does it come from? And so to understand it, we got to go back to a conversation between Jesus and a Hebrew scholar by the name of Nicodemus. Now, the topic of their discussion is the kingdom of God.

[9 : 09] And that was something that was an absolute obsession of the Jewish people. And the reason why it was an obsession, rightly so, is because the kingdom of God is what they longed for. They couldn't wait for the Messiah, the perfect King, to come and reign.

Oh, this would be a time of abundant life, of truly being loved and cared for, this Messiah, this King. When the kingdom would come, it would usher in a time of great peace and shalom.

Oh, this is what they craved. It's what they longed for. It's what they dreamed about the kingdom of God. And because they were God's chosen people in the Old Testament, they assumed that those that would get the kingdom would be Jewish.

Which is why what Jesus says in verse 3 blows Nicodemus' mind. Look at it. John 3, verse 3, Jesus answered him, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Now, that statement completely perplexes Nicodemus. He does not know what to think of it. He doesn't know how to handle it. He's not quite sure what to say. And so what he does say is the most normal, natural response that anybody would give to such a statement.

[10 : 37] Verse 4, Nicodemus said to him, But how can a man be born when he's old? I mean, can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?

That's the natural response. It's what you and I would say. I don't get it. Like, you can't really get back in your mother's womb. I mean, how is somebody who's 80 years old going to be reborn?

It doesn't seem to make any sense. Now, this is where a lot of people go wrong with this passage. Listen, faith family, Nicodemus is no num-num. He is a Hebrew scholar.

He's brilliant. He's sharp. He's educated. The issue here is not that he doesn't understand Jesus. The issue is that he doesn't believe Jesus.

Here's what I mean. First of all, it is impossible to be reborn. I mean, silly rabbit, you can't get back in your mother's womb and be reborn. You know as well as I know that what you just said, Jesus, is biologically impossible.

[11 : 41] It can't happen. No one does that. But it's not only not possible, it isn't necessary. See, here's what would be going on in Nicodemus' mind.

Listen, if the kingdom of God, are y'all still with me? If the kingdom of God is given to the Jews and my first birth was Jewish, why would I need a second one?

I wouldn't even need a second birth. Don't you see, Jesus? I'm already Jewish. I already have everything that is needed to have the kingdom of God.

And that is why, if you think Jesus has blown Nicodemus' mind thus far, wait till you hear what he says next. Verse 6. John chapter 3, verse 6.

That which is born of the flesh, Nicodemus, is flesh. And that which is born of the spirit is spirit.

Listen, don't marvel that I say to you, you must be born again.

[12 : 41] The wind blows where it wishes and you hear it sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the spirit.

Now at this point, his mind, Nicodemus is just like, what are you talking about? Not born of the flesh, but born of the spirit. I don't understand. Jesus here is essentially saying, come in here, come here, the birth you need, this second birth, and it's the only birth that gets you the kingdom of God.

It's the only birth that gets you in relationship with God. It's the only birth that brings all the blessings and abundant life that God gives isn't of your flesh. It's of the spirit.

It's a God birth, not a human birth. And John, in John chapter 1, has already addressed this.

Look at John chapter 1, verse 13 here on the screen. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, say it with me, but of God.

[13 : 53] God, don't you understand, Nicodemus, the birth you need to have the kingdom isn't a fleshly birth. It's a spirit birth, and therefore you must be born again.

So let me summarize how the conversation is going thus far. It is impossible to enter into the kingdom of God. It is impossible to get the very life you long for.

Look at me, faith family. I would say this is not just the obsession and longing of Nicodemus. It's the longing of our very hearts. We were created to be in relationship with God.

So whether you know it or not, that thing you're longing for can only be filled in God. And to get it, you must be born again. Jesus is saying here, without that, you cannot have the kingdom of God.

This second birth, in fact, notice this on the screen. Here's a way of remembering it. If you're not born again, you don't get in. If you're not born again, you don't get in. And that second birth that you need, listen, tell me this isn't encouraging, has absolutely nothing to do with you.

[15 : 06] It's not of the flesh. It's not of humanness. It's of God. That means that salvation is completely outside of your reach, of your ability, or your power.

Let me say it a different way. You can't save you. You must be born again. And you can't be born again apart from God. Now, why would that be the case?

Why is it that this salvation that we all long for and need, that is to be in right relationship with God, why is it out of reach of human effort, ability, power, or strength? Well, if you were going to prove that to an Old Testament scholar like Nicodemus, where do you think you might go?

You can talk to me. New Testament or Old Testament? Well, the New Testament hasn't been written yet. So, the Old Testament, all right, we'll narrow it down. You'd use the Old Testament to an Old Testament scholar to prove your point.

And that is exactly what Jesus does. Look at the reference he makes in verse 14. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.

[16 : 16] Now, Jesus says so much in that simple little verse, that simple little statement. It is jam-packed full of truth. And listen, if I knew my Old Testament or you knew your Old Testament the way Nicodemus knew his Old Testament, you'd already know the point that Jesus is making.

But because we don't fully understand that reference the way Nicodemus would have, let's actually very quickly look at the reference Jesus makes because it sets up John 3, 16.

Look at it. It's found in Numbers. It's Numbers chapter 21. Numbers chapter 21 and verse 4. You'll notice it on the screen. Numbers 21, verse 4. Now, from Mount Hor, they set out to the way of the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom.

And the people became impatient on the way. They're like the kids in the back row. How much longer? How much longer? Five more minutes. All right? They're impatient.

They want to know when are we going to get there? And the people spoke against God and against Moses. Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no food or water.

[17 : 26] We loathe this worthless food. Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people so that many of the people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses and said, We have sinned for we have spoken against the Lord and against you.

Pray to the Lord that He may take away the serpents from us. And so Moses prayed for the people and the Lord said to Moses, Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole and everyone who is bitten and sees it shall live.

They'll be given life. So Moses made the bronze serpent and set it on a pole and if the serpent bit anyone, He would look at the bronze serpent and live. He'd be given life.

There's so much there. Y'all got Christmas plans? Because there's so much there. I am not going to take the time to unpack it all nor do I think that you showed up on Christmas Eve wanting to unpack a story about being bit by poisonous snakes.

But what I will point out and what Nicodemus would have understood from that story is the broader themes that that story gives us. Here we go. Number one, the people sinned against God.

[18 : 35] The people sinned against God. They rejected God's commands. They rebelled against Him. They refused to believe. They rejected the leaders that God put in place. They refused to trust God's providence for them.

They sinned against Yahweh. Number two, the wages of that sin was death. As a result of their rebellion, the text plainly shows us that many in that place died.

Number three, they could not save themselves and they knew they couldn't. It's why they go to Moses and ask Him, would you pray to God? Because God's going to have to intervene. God's going to have to do something.

We can't get ourselves out of this. It doesn't matter that we're Jewish. Our flesh, tell me where you've heard this before, won't get us out.

Our ability, our strength, our power, our skin color, our ethnicity won't solve this problem. We cannot save ourselves.

[19 : 34] We need rescued. Number four, God gave life to those who trusted. Those who looked to the bronze serpent, who trusted in what God had said, what were they given and everybody said?

Life. They were given life. And you say, what in the world does this have to do with Christmas? And I say, everything.

Absolutely everything. Listen to me, faith family, lean in. Jesus is using that Old Testament illustration as an example of something bigger, namely, what the rest of the Bible teaches.

Are you listening? Say yes. Here's what the rest of the Bible teaches. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. That's not an Israel problem.

That's a human problem. We have all rebelled against God. We have all turned our backs against God. We have sinned. And do you know what the wages of that sin is? Based on Romans 6, 23, the wages of sin is death.

[20 : 40] And guess what? We cannot get ourselves out of that situation. We cannot save ourselves. That's why, lean in, you must be born again.

Don't you see, Nicodemus? The birth you need for the kingdom of God, you can't do because you can't save you. You're just like your fathers in the wilderness who sinned and died as a result of it and could not get themselves out of their situation.

They were, you were, and we are in need of rescue. What does it have to do with Christmas?

John 3, 16. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son.

And whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be rescued.

[22 : 09] Saved through him. That word for and we quote it for God so loved the world and we don't even know what that for is about. That for is giving you the reason of all the context I've just laid out in chapter 3.

This is the reason God sent his son. That is just as we do not have the ability to save ourselves guess what? God chose to act on our behalf by sending his son on a rescue mission. A mission to free us from our sins and give us eternal life. So compare it to what Jesus is saying in terms of the illustration in the Old Testament. Look at it here on the screen that God has provided a way to life.

God has provided the way. You don't have to provide the way because you can't provide the way. He's provided a way to life just as he did with Moses only this time it's not through the lifting up of a servant it's through the sending of his own son.

Nicodemus there is a way to this new birth. There's a way to this life that's required to get the kingdom and that way is Jesus.

[23 : 25] God so loved the world he sent his only son. My friends that is the reason for the season. Amen. That is what Christmas is all about.

Is that not after all what the angel said when the proclamation was made on that first Christmas? Matthew chapter 1 verse 21 She will bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus for what's his mission?

He will save his people from their sins. Christmas is a rescue mission. It is not us being on mission for God it's God being on mission for us.

It is God sending his son into the world so that we can have the very thing we can't get on our own namely new life. For anyone who believes in him will not perish but have ever lasting life.

Let me give you just very two quick implications that I would have you meditate on this Christmas as I close. The first is this. Notice it on the screen. The mission of the incarnation was not for one nation.

[24 : 39] It's for all nations. And we should amen that. Because listen, this is the problem when you pluck out John 3.16 from the rest of John 3. The reason why that phrase God so!

love the world ought to grip us is that Nicodemus assumed that the kingdom of God was only for Jews. And what Jesus is saying is no, no, no, no. God so loved not just one nation.

Oh, make no mistake of his love for Israel. But God doesn't just love Israel. God loved the world. Oh, Jesus did not just come for one nation.

He came for all nations. That is, whether you are red, yellow, black, or white, you are precious in his sight. And if you will look to him and believe, you will be born again.

That's the good news of Christmas. And here's one more implication. It's this. The mission of the incarnation was not for condemnation, but for salvation.

[25 : 46] Verse 17, again, God didn't send his son into the world to condemn it, but to save it. And that's a really good word for the church. I could preach a whole other sermon on this.

Because you know what? A lot of people when they come into church, they feel what? Condemned. But listen, Jesus didn't come to condemn you. You were already that. Jesus came so that this would be said of you.

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. He didn't come to judge you. He didn't come to condemn you. He came to rescue you and save you from your sins.

Here's the beautiful, beautiful, beautiful truth of Christmas, and I hope you're listening. When God saw us in our sins, he didn't turn away.

Instead, he sent his son. he could have just said, no thank you. But instead, out of love, amazing, abounding, God-sized love, that night in Bethlehem, he sent his son.

[27 : 04] And if you want proof, I'm done. If you want proof of these two things coming together, that is that he came not just for one nation, but all nations, and that he came not for condemnation, but for salvation, guess how far you need to go?

The next chapter. In John chapter four, guess what happens? A Samaritan woman, not a Jewish woman, not a Jewish man, a Samaritan woman with a broken past.

She's been through multiple relationships, and at a well, she enters the kingdom. Faith family, the mission of Jesus was that manger that would lead to a cross and lead to an empty tomb.

The incarnation was a rescue mission that on that first Christmas, God sent his son into the world.

Why? Because you and I were just like Jessica. we're just like Jessica, trapped in our sin, unable to

save ourselves, in desperate need of rescue.

And the good news of Christmas is that God so loved the world that he sent his only son that whoever would believe would have eternal life. As the famous Christmas song says, mild he laid his glory by, born that man no more may die.

[28 : 40] Born to raise the sons of earth. Born to give us second birth.

And all God's people said, amen. Lord, thank you for this great truth of Christmas that when we think about that manger, yes, it is a miracle.

And yes, there were a lot of different emotions running through Mary and Joseph's minds and the shepherds and everybody else, but when we look at that manger, we need to be reminded that it was missional.

The father purposely sent his son. And we ought to be just so overwhelmed with how much love is represented in that, that in all of our rebellion and all of our sin and all of our turning our backs on God and all the things that we've done, you didn't turn away, you sent Jesus.

I really pray that tonight we would think deeply about the beauty of that and the good news of that. God, we would be so overwhelmed by that we would go tell it on the mountain over the hills and everywhere.

[30 : 06] Because we can talk about our being on mission for Jesus, but when we understand Jesus' mission for us, it will compel us to share the good news.

Lord, thank you for your love. Thank you that you so loved us. You sent your Son. Help us rest in that this evening, I pray. In Jesus' name and God's people said, Amen.

Amen. Amen.