

Freeing Jesus

Chapter 3: Savior

Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

—Luke 2:10-11

Every night while growing up Diana recited this prayer with her mom: “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray thee, Lord, my soul to keep; If I should die before I wake, I pray thee, Lord, my soul to take.” It was the one prayer her mom taught her. “A prayer of protection against death in the night and, if death should come, a prayer to go safely into the arms of Jesus.”

This prayer was, in many ways, deeply countercultural in a world consumed with chasing away the fears of death. “My parents seemed part of a generation molding a plastic future where nothing would ever grow old, decay, or die.” In the midst of this, impermanence managed to sneak in nevertheless. “The idea of the Lord taking my soul in sleep resulted in terrors of the night.” Diana was afraid of dying and cried out one night, “I don’t want to die! I don’t want to die!” In that night she was feeling the first pangs of mortality and crying out for comfort and certainty.

“The friendly Jesus of earliest memory and the instructive teacher Jesus who helped me understand the commands seemed absent in the dark. I wanted to believe that whatever this life was that I had been given, the consciousness I experienced, was more than a brief sojourn through time. I wanted to believe that life meant something. I wanted to be remembered. Not endless nothing. Anxiety surrounded me, forming nightmare clouds before sleep.”

It was in that context that she started to think about the two words that formed a glowing red cross on the neon sign that hung outside a storefront church on the edge of her neighborhood: Jesus Saves.

“Savior may well be the most ubiquitous term that Christians use to describe Jesus. This is especially true in Western Christianity, and among Protestant churches in particular, where the emphasis on Jesus as the One who saves us from sin and death is a primary focus of both preaching and piety...’Jesus saves’ is understood as the central and continued meaning of his work for both individual Christians and the life of the world.”

“Yet, oddly enough, ‘Savior’ appears only twice in the gospels to describe Jesus. One is at the beginning of the gospel of Luke, and the other is in John 4:42, where neighbors of the Samaritan woman proclaim, ‘This is truly the Savior of the world.’ Other titles, like ‘teacher’ and ‘rabbi,’ appear far more frequently...If, however, you ask random Christians who Jesus is, I am willing to bet the answer ‘Jesus is my Savior’ would be high on the list, and perhaps the top reply.”

When Diana moved to Arizona with her parents as a teenager, she attended a small independent church, Scottsdale Bible Church. It was there that she leaned about the intense focus on Jesus as Savior that has shaped the thought of so many North American Christians.

In this church and the circle of teens that became Diana’s friends, “Jesus was not a tender friend or a moral teacher. Instead, he was their Savior and the Savior of the world, who would reward them with heaven and punish all who did not believe in him. He died on the cross to cleanse them from sin, to take their place when God rightly judged them sinners. Jesus saved them from God’s eternal wrath. They trusted in him. They believed in him. They put their lives in his hands. And they would be with him forever in heaven, not consigned to eternal nothingness. Their faith burned as brightly as the neon cross back...in Baltimore: Jesus saves.”

This description is reflective of a particular theology of atonement, or a particular idea of how “Jesus saves.” Theologies of atonement try to answer the question of how we are reconciled with God, how we come into relationship with God through the cross of Jesus. The interesting thing about the Bible is that it contains several different motifs or metaphors of what has come to be called atonement theory. “Yet Protestant Christians, and even a good number of Catholics, are not aware of the multiplicity of images for atonement and are, instead, stuck in the single story of sacrifice. A strange vision of God lies under the story—that God is angry with humankind and must have that rage assuaged.”

Throughout the centuries of church history, Christians have employed different explanations and theories to explain what happened on the cross. For Diana, “Salvation is not really about heaven; it is not an escape. It is about living beyond fear, knowing that death comes for each of us, often in mundane and quiet ways.

Julian of Norwich, a fourteenth-century mystic wrote: “It is characteristic of God to overcome evil with good. Jesus Christ therefore, who himself overcame evil with good, is our true Mother.” Diana concludes: “*Jesus Christ, Savior, our true Mother.*”

Questions for Discussion

What do you think of the idea that Jesus is a savior? How do you understand this notion and what does it mean to you? Do you think of Jesus as your savior? Why or why not?

Are you familiar with the idea of sacrifice as the primary meaning of Jesus as savior? What do you think of this idea and its implications for human beings and the world?

Does it surprise you that the Christians have not arrived at a uniform understanding regarding the meaning Jesus as savior? Why or why not? What is your response to this situation?

What do you think about the idea that the Bible contains more than one way of understanding the meaning of Jesus as savior? Does this make sense to you? Are you familiar with other ideas or motifs? If so, which ones?

What did you learn?

What questions do you have?