

Jesus, Savior of the World

Rich Nathan

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Advent: The Second Coming

Matthew 1.18-21

How many of you have read Tolkien's trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, or have seen the movies? The story takes place over the course of only two years. But for four little Hobbits, those two years were incredible. They were engaged in an impossible quest to destroy a magic ring, a cataclysmic war between good and evil, they had encounters with orcs and elves and wizards. Their adventure involved deeds of courage and acts of betrayal, the making of friends, grief over deaths, the depths of despair and the renewal of hope.

The author, Tolkien, set the story into a larger story, the world of Middle Earth complete with its own language and mythology and history. The notion of little people becoming part of a really big story is conveyed in the final chapter of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy in which this unlikely hero named Frodo is settling on the title of the book that he's written to tell his tale. Frodo's Uncle Bilbo has settled on a title for his memoir; it is called *My Diary*. But Frodo has something grander in mind. His memoir is called

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The Downfall of the Lord of the Rings and the Return of the King (as seen by the Little People; Being the Memoirs of Bilbo and Frodo of the Shire, Supplemented by the Accounts of Their Friends and the Learning of the Wise).

Without even reading the book, you get the picture. Common people in an out-of-the-way place caught up in a huge adventure of mammoth importance, a simple diary that contains a grand epic.

Most of us live pretty unremarkable lives in ordinary places like Westerville and Hilliard and Gahanna and Columbus, Ohio. But listen, like Frodo and Bilbo Baggins, we are part of a much bigger story, one that started long before yours or my birth and one that will continue on long after our death, a story that is as wide as the universe and as old as eternity – the story of God rescuing our world through Jesus Christ.

How does this story start? It starts with these words, "In the beginning..." In the beginning the Triune God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, created the universe out of gracious love and sheer delight. He made human beings in his image to love him and to know and love each other. And he entrusted these human beings with the oversight and care of his creation.

But foolishly, our first parents turned their backs on God. They rejected God's loving authority. And, as a result, there were terrible consequences for people and for our planet. Because we human beings turned our backs on God and sought to run our own lives instead of living under God's loving authority. We damaged our relationships with ourselves. We've damaged our relationships with one another. And most of all, we've damaged our relationship with God.

But God in his great mercy enacted a plan to save the world and to put right whatever is wrong. At first, God revealed himself to one nation, the nation of Israel by which he intended to bless all nations. And then he sent prophets who foretold the birth of a coming King, the one who would save our planet. The big story in which we little Hobbits get to play a small, but really significant role is the story of how God sent Jesus into the world to save all of creation.

This Christmas Eve I want to consider a little part of the story in a message that I've titled "Jesus, Savior of the World." Let's pray.

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18This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.

19Because 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.

20But 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.

21She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

There are many titles that the Bible gives to the One born on Christmas – Son of Man, Son of God, Good Shepherd, Great Physician, Rabbi, Teacher. But the most precious name to Christians and the one that he is most commonly known by is Jesus which means Savior. In the Hebrew Jesus' name would have been Yeshua, or Joshua. Just as the Old Testament Joshua brought about the salvation of the Israelites by bringing them into the Promised Land, so the Joshua born at Christmas, the One who we know as Jesus, achieved salvation for all of God's people, indeed, for all of creation. Our Savior Jesus was born to deal with all of the terrible consequences that resulted from us turning our backs on God.

What happens when we reject God's authority over our lives and assert our own? We damage our relationship with ourselves. How many of you have a bad habit that you wish you could break, but you just don't seem to be able to break it? For example, if you smoke the issue of your smoking is clearly not you need more information about

the health affects of smoking, or you need stronger warnings on cigarette packages, or more graphic pictures of people with lung cancer or emphysema. If you smoke, I am certain that the issue for you is not that you are not convinced that smoking is really bad for you, or bad for those who breathe in your second-hand smoke.

Is anyone in America unaware of how awful smoking is for their health? The information is out there. There have been hundreds of well-publicized medical studies about the affect of smoking and many successful lawsuits brought against tobacco companies, anti-smoking campaigns – all proving that smoking is bad. So, if you are a smoker, why haven't you stopped smoking?

Could it be that because, to some degree, you can't?

Do any of you struggle with overeating? I don't just mean at the holidays, but for you, you use food to deal with feelings of sadness or depression. You use food to give you a little pick-me-up, to deal with your anxiety. You are unable, and have been unable for years, to control your eating.

Here are the top ten most common addictions in America:

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Top Ten Addictions:

1. Alcohol	
2. Smoking	
3. Drugs	Involving both legal and illegal drugs
4. Gambling	
5. Food	
6. Video Games	This is an interesting one. There has been an explosion of addictive behavior in the last 15 years around video games. If you find that you're using video games is intruding on your life – its pressing into your ability to work, or your important relationships, or its closing you off from relationships; they say the most addictive video games, are the ones in which you assume the identity of a character and you are able to interact with other players.
7. Internet	You feel anxious or upset when you can't get online to tweet, or facebook, or text someone.
8. Sex	You engage in risky behaviors to satisfy

	your urges.
9. Shopping	This is something to call attention to at Christmas, but you are involved in excessive shopping throughout the year. It is not only hurting you financially, but it is also straining your relationship with your spouse or with some other loved one.
10. Work	Work is a good thing. But when it becomes an obsession; if it gets to the point where you can't stop working, or you can't stop thinking about work when you are supposed to be off the job, it may be a sign that you are addicted.

Do you know anyone who has any of these addictions? Why don't they stop? Why don't you stop? Are you addicted to trying to fix someone or help someone, who has one of these addictions?

Gerald May, who wrote what I consider to be the very best book on addiction, titled *Addiction and Grace*,

SLIDE Book Cover – *Addiction and Grace* by Gerald May

...gives us this definition of addiction:

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Addiction exists wherever persons are internally compelled to give energy to things that are not their true desires. To define it directly, addiction is a state of compulsion, obsession, or preoccupation that enslaves a person's will and desire. Addiction sidetracks and eclipses the energy of our deepest, truest desire for love and goodness. We succumb because the energy of our desire becomes attached, nailed, to specific behaviors, objects, or people.

Addiction is the nailing of your will, the fixing of your desire to some object, some behavior, some person so that try as you might you can't pull your will free.

Let me tell you a true story. There was a man named Mel Trotter, who grew up in Illinois over a century ago. He was the son of an alcoholic bartender. Like his two elder brothers, Mel learned to tend bar as a child. When he became a teenager he began to drink and Mel became a teenage alcoholic.

He got married at age 21 and spent the next 6 years in a cycle of drunken binges and tearful promises to his wife that he would stop drinking. He cycled down into a deeper and deeper pit of self-hatred and remorse. Mel and his wife had a little boy. He

promised at that point to stop drinking. He checked himself into a hospital. They gave him some medication. The moment he was released from rehab, he sold his medication so that he could buy a bottle of whiskey. Not even the death of his 2-year old son could keep him from drinking.

One day he returned home after a 10-day drinking binge and he found his 2-year old son lifeless in the arms of his mother. Mel's wife had never left their son's side. She was completely broken down with grief. Mel swore that he would never drink again. And then he left his little boy's funeral to drown his sorrows at the nearest bar.

Well, Mel hopped a freight train to Chicago where he landed penniless and hopeless on a bitter, cold night in January. This was about 100 years ago. He had no friends, no family, no reason to continue. He sold his shoes for one last drink and then he planned to commit suicide. It was at this moment that Mel's life turned around. He met a young man named Tom McKay, who was walking the streets of Chicago in a blizzard looking for lost souls who were walking in Chicago's bone-chilling cold.

Tom took Mel to a mission where he met the mission's superintendent that evening. The mission superintendent put his arm around Mel and looked him in the eye and said, "Jesus loves you and so do I. He wants to save you and rescue you. If you want prayer, lift up your hands and let God know that you want to make room for him in your life tonight."

Mel lifted up his hands and that night he met the God who came to earth at Christmas through the birth of his Son, Jesus Christ. Mel was immediately changed. At 27 years of age, Mel's battle with alcohol was over. He reconnected with his wife. He began to work for a city mission. And then over the next four decades Mel not only opened a rescue mission in Grand Rapids, but he helped start 68 other rescue missions around the United States.

See, Mel discovered on a cold, January night 100 years ago what millions of people have found when battling an addiction – that he didn't have the strength to overcome his own problems. He needed Jesus – whose name means Savior. He needed a Savior to pry his will loose from the thing it was attached to.

Do you have an addiction? Do you know someone who is addicted?

Maybe you've heard of, or read about 12-Step Recovery programs. We have them here at Vineyard Columbus – you can check them out online. Let me read to you the first three steps of most 12-step programs whether we're talking about alcohol, or smoking, or overeating.

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Step 1 – We admit that we are powerless over our addiction and that our lives have become unmanageable.

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Step 2 – We came to believe that only a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. [In other words, we came to believe we need a Savior.]

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Step 3 – We made a decision to turn our will over to the care of God.

Why did God come to earth at Christmas? Why do we celebrate? Because we need a Savior. There are things in our lives that are too strong for us to overcome on our own.

But salvation is not just an inner thing. Gaining power to pry loose our wills from whatever they are attached to; salvation is not just that. Jesus came to save us in our relationships with each other. It is not hard to find a breakdown in relationships in our world. How many of you have some conflict with a family member this Christmas, a relational breakdown with a parent, or a child, a sibling, or an in-law? How many of your families have been wounded by divorce? In the wider world, how many wars do you think are currently going on right now?

I checked the UN website and counted up 34 military conflicts that are going on in some part of the world right now. And that's on the United Nations website devoted to making peace in this world.

There are lots of reasons why our relationships with one another are broken down. One of the main reasons is that the strong in our world oppress the weak. In conflict after conflict one of the primary issues is that someone or some group that is stronger acts unjustly and beats up someone or a group that is weaker. Since our first parents turned their backs on God, the principle by which our world has operated is this: might makes right. You see it in the opening pages of the Bible immediately following our first parent's sin, we read of one man, a man named Cain, who killed his brother, Able.

Might makes right. This past week I read a tragic story involving a boat in Indonesia which sank in a storm. The boat was packed with illegal immigrants. As the boat was sinking, the Captain and the crew grabbed all of the life vests and leapt overboard leaving 200 men, women and children to drown.

What difference does the birth of Jesus make to a world in which the strong continually step upon the weak? There is another famous boat-sinking that you are familiar with.

Many of you saw the movie the Titanic that was out a few years ago. You know the story. The largest ship in the world hits an iceberg on its maiden voyage from

Southampton to New York. 1635 lives were lost at sea. 83 years after the sinking of the Titanic, a woman by the name of Edith Haisman, age 98, recalled during the opening of a Memorial Garden to the victims how safe in the lifeboat she waved to her father who was on deck smoking a cigar and drinking a glass of brandy. "I'll see you in New York," he called out. But he didn't make it. And almost none of the men on board made it.

Winston Churchill was the head of the Admiralty in England at the time. He wrote a telegram that summed up his view of the Titanic tragedy. He said, "The whole episode fascinates me. It shows that in spite of all the inept inequalities of our modern life, at bottom, tested to its foundations, our civilization is Christian." And listen to how he defines what it means to be Christian. "How differently Imperial Rome or ancient Greece would have settled the problem. The swells, the potentates, would have gotten off the ship first with their concubines and pet slaves and soldiers and guards. And then the sailors, when they had their chance, would have leaped off the ship, headed by their Captain. And as for the rest, whoever could bribe the crew the most would have had the preference and the rest could go to hell. But not so with the Titanic – the children got off first, and the women, and the weak. And the strong went down with the ship."

See, in a world without Christ, it is always "might makes right." The strong always wins. Who cares who gets pushed out of the way. Who cares who gets stepped on while the strong grab the best for themselves. But because of Jesus, the strong, the powerful, the wealthy often are willing to take a backseat to promote the interest of the weak, the least, the last, and the lost.

I think of a former Christian seminary president named Robertson McQuilkin. He used to be the president of Columbia Bible College and Seminary. He was a wonderful conference speaker and writer, who left his seminary position to care for his wife, Muriel, who suffered with Alzheimer's for the last twenty years. He has written a wonderful little book on living with a wife who has Alzheimer's. The book is called "A Promise Kept." I would highly recommend it for any of you who have parents or relatives suffering from Alzheimer's.

But there is this precious little incident in Dr. McQuilkin's book in which he says that he was traveling by plane with his wife. His plane was delayed in Atlanta for a few hours. That is a real challenge to be in a strange airport with a person who has severe Alzheimer's - every few minutes the same questions and the same answers. What are we doing here? When are we going home? How are we going to get home? And every few minutes they would take this fast-paced walk down the terminal. His wife, he said, was always a speed walker. He had to practically jog to keep up with her to keep her from getting lost as she turned into stores and wandered around.

They finally sat down in the waiting area by their gate and he said there was a very attractive woman working on her laptop computer who kept glancing up at them from her terminal. And then as she typed, she mumbled something to Dr. McQuilkin. He

said, “Excuse me? What was that?” She said, “Oh, watching you with your wife, I just began wondering would I ever find a man who would love me the way you love your wife?”

What a difference the birth of our Savior makes. He saves the weak from being stepped on by the strong. The strong taking care of the weak; that was the example that our Savior Jesus gave us; the strong taking care of the weak.

It is estimated that more than 95% of the food pantries and the homeless shelters and the activities on behalf of the homeless – more than 95% of all of the activity – the meals brought, the blankets on cold winter nights – is done by Christians. You don’t find many atheists running food pantries. There might be a couple, but not many. You don’t find many atheists down under the bridges of our city week after week making sure that the men and women who live by the river and under the bridges stay warm at night. But you will find Christians from this church and other churches making their way down ravines and climbing under highway overpasses to find men and women who have no one to rescue them. You won’t find many atheist relief agencies, but around the world you will find World Vision and Compassion International and Samaritan’s Purse.

He shall be called Jesus because he will save his people from their sins and from the tragic results of sin.

Jesus was born to be our Savior, not just from the problems that we struggle with internally. Jesus was born to be our Savior not just from the problems that we struggle with with each other. Jesus was born to be our Savior to save us from the problems we have with God.

Notice in Matthew 1 the Angel doesn’t say,

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And you shall call his name Rabbi for he shall teach his people about the way to deal with their sins.

Many people today misunderstand the Christian faith all together. They think that the essential thing about our Christian faith is the teaching of Jesus. They say, “Here is the ultimate religious genius.” In Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount we have the greatest of all philosophies. What the world needs today is to be taught the Sermon on the Mount.

The Angel doesn’t say,

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Joseph, you shall call him the Great Example.

So many people say what we really need in the world today is someone we can look up to. A great example that won't disappoint us – people like Tim Tebow, or sports heroes who live clean lives who will inspire us. But the Angel doesn't say to Joseph, "Call him Rabbi, Teacher – what the world needs is great teaching." "Name him Great Example because what the world needs is an inspiring model." The Angel says:

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Call him Jesus because he will save the world from their sins

...Because the world's first need above every other need is that we need to be saved. Listen, whether you are religious or not, whether you are a church-goer or not, whether you consider yourself a follower of Christ or not, everyone of us here today knows that we need to be saved. Everyone of us has in our hearts a dream, a secret wish, a fantasy, which tells us that if we just got this one thing then we would be OK. If we just got this one thing, we'll be saved. If I could just get this one person to love me, then everything would be OK. If my loved one's life would turn around, then everything would be OK. If I could just get married and escape from singleness, then I will be saved; everything will be OK. If I could just get pregnant and have my own baby, then everything would be OK. If I could just get this one job, just get out of debt, just get a certain score on an exam, then I will be OK.

This one thing, this one person, will save me from failing in life; from mediocrity, from emptiness.

The Bible tells us that our problem in life is that we are looking to everything and everyone other than Jesus to be our Savior. We know we need to be saved; we've just fixed our hopes and desires on the wrong thing.

Friends, have you ever had the experience of getting what you thought would make everything right and when you got it, it didn't make everything right. You thought you getting married would absolutely complete you and maybe you still feel alone. You are struggling with intimacy. You are struggling to connect.

I remember talking with a physician a few years ago. He was the Chief Medical Officer of one of America's largest healthcare systems. He said to me, "Rich, I've done everything that the world tells me should make me happy." He had done fantastically well as an undergraduate, went to one of America's top medical schools, graduated with honors, completed a prestigious residency, had a great job, a big house. He said to me with real sadness, "Is this all there is?"

Is that it? He had pinned his hopes on all of these saviors – high marks in school will make things right in my life. Going to a top medical school will make things right in my life. Getting invited into a great residency program will make things right. Getting a top

job, making hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, having a large house, having a beautiful wife.

Why did God send his Son to be born on Christmas? Here is what we read in Matthew 20:28,

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28just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Jesus came not to be served, but to die, to give his life. And this sets him apart from the founder of every other religion. The purpose of the founder of every other religion was to live, to teach, to be an example. Jesus says, “My purpose in coming was to die and to be a sacrifice.” Jesus came to give his life as a ransom for many, a ransom in the place of, as a substitute for many.

These days we don’t use the word “ransom” very often except when we are talking about a kidnapping. The word that’s used here referred to the buying of freedom of a slave, or a prisoner. The ransomer would make a huge sacrificial payment that would match the value of, or pay the debt of a slave or prisoner in order to buy that prisoner or slave out of slavery. Jesus came to pay that ransom. But since the slavery that he was dealing with is cosmic in scope – Jesus was dealing with cosmic evil - our bondage to sin and Satan and death – the ransom required was a cosmic payment.

Jesus is saying, “I will pay an amount that you can’t possibly pay. I will do what you can’t possibly do. I will buy your freedom and save you.”

When you read the four gospels, the four biographies of Jesus – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, you discover that there is very little attention given to the Christmas story – just a couple of chapters in the gospel of Matthew and just a couple of chapters in the gospel of Luke. But by way of contrast, there is a huge amount of space given to the last days of Jesus and to his death. In terms of proportion, the story of Jesus’ death, not his birth, dominates the gospel accounts. We’re given every detail regarding his death. In fact, as someone once pointed out, the story of Jesus’ death is so graphic, so detailed we can almost hear the sound of the hammer driving the nails into his hands and into his feet.

It was his death on the cross that caused Jesus to fulfill the meaning of his name, Savior. Because it is his death on the cross that saves us.

Friends, have you ever considered what Jesus did by dying on a cross for you? The cross does not ask us to save ourselves. It doesn’t tell us to do something in order to be saved. It says salvation is done here. Salvation is completed. Salvation is finished. This is the gospel message. There is something that happened 2000 years ago which saves us.

There is a saving event, a past saving fact. God laid your sins upon His Son. Jesus saves us by bearing our punishment and by taking our guilt upon himself. And it is this past completed finished act which saves us.

You say, "How does the cross save me?" God himself laid your sins and mine upon his own dear Son. Everyone in the ancient world believed that when you and I sin we run up a debt with God, or in the ancient world with the gods. In the ancient world they understood the idea of justice, that this debt with God or the gods had to be paid. What no one in the ancient world ever imagined was that God himself would come and pay our debts, that he would take our sins upon himself, that he would come into the world to save us by bearing our punishment and by taking our guilt upon himself.

The most famous verse in the Bible, John 3.16 says:

SLIDE Jn 3:16

16For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

It is Jesus who saves. It is his death on the cross which saves.

A few years ago I was in a restaurant with my wife, Marlene. It came time to pay the bill and I asked the waiter to come over to bring me the bill. He left and came back a few minutes later and said that I had no bill. He told me that someone in the restaurant picked up the tab.

I could have argued with the waiter. I could have said, "No, I insist on paying" after the bill was paid. I could have been a fool and said, "Waiter, you're lying. No one would be nice enough to pay my wife's and my bill. Here's the money." I didn't argue with the waiter. I didn't tell the waiter that I thought he was lying. Instead, I simply believed the waiter's message and said, "Thank you. I'm grateful to have my bill already paid."

God said, "I have paid your bill by coming to earth on Christmas, by dying on Good Friday and by rising from the dead on Easter Sunday. The reason I came was not to be served, but to serve and to give my life as a ransom for many." God says, "If you want to be right with me, if you want to be saved, you will be saved by my payment on the cross." God says, "If you want to be forgiven; if you want to be reconciled to me; you will be forgiven and reconciled by my payment at the cross." God says, "If you want to become my child, if you don't want to be afraid of death, if you want to have your life changed and transformed, if you want to be part of the big story – my rescue of the universe from the consequences of your sin, all you need to do is believe this message. The price of salvation has already been paid." God says, "I've picked up your tab. The bill you ran up by your sins is paid by my Son - you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save you from your sins." Let's pray.