

## SALVATION: THE LIBERATING WORK OF GOD

Sunny Lee

She was moving with her son to her late husband's village, which was called "Milyang," because her late husband had always missed his hometown. When they entered the village, the car broke down and they were stuck on the road. So they had no choice but to call someone to help them. A mechanic came and checked the car. It had to be towed. In the towing vehicle, she asked the man, "Are you from this village?" "Yes, I am" "How is it? Is it a good place to live?" "Isn't it the same as any place in the world? It is not too good or too bad to live here." "Do you know the meaning of 'Milyang'?" she asked. "No, what is it?" "It means 'secret sunshine.'"

This is the beginning of a movie which motivates us to search for what the secret shining light might be that this woman metaphorically mentions throughout the movie.

She started to give piano lessons to school kids for a living and she met a pharmacist whose drug store was across the street from where she was living. The pharmacist was a very enthusiastic evangelist who talked about the gospel with whoever she met. The pharmacist who was called "Deacon Kim" tried to talk about God and Jesus. "Come on in piano teacher; do you know God's love? We all need God, especially someone like you who is an unfortunate one." "I am not unfortunate. But anyway thank you for your thinking of me." She ignored his words at first.

One day, her son was kidnapped and killed by a man he trusted. She went out of her mind and became more and more like a crazy woman. Then, "Deacon Kim" came to her again and introduced a spiritual or Pentecostal service for healing. Even though she was not sure at first if she wanted to go, she went to the service because she needed a channel to let her feelings out and she experienced a catharsis. Her crying seemed to rid her of all her resentments and bitterness. She looked like a new person. Actually she felt like a new person. She was sharing her story with people at the meeting, cell group and with everyone around her. She was saying that God saved her from her sin and she was amazed how happy she could be because of the grace of forgiveness.

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*Sunny Lee is a Mennonite pastor in London ON, Canada.*

Eventually she reached the conclusion that she had to share this wonderful Gospel with the killer. She wanted to make God known to whomever she met but especially the killer. She wanted to say she would forgive what he had done to her son by saying, "God is love. I came to forgive you." Even though many people said this was not a good idea or was not necessary, she went to see him in prison.

She started to talk about her experience of salvation and how much God loved her. Even though it was not easy to face her son's killer and say he was forgiven, she did. When she had finished talking, he said, "I am glad you have met God. I have met God here in prison too. I experienced God's forgiveness of my sin and I am in peace now. I am not afraid of dying whenever it comes." All of a sudden, she became frustrated and the peace and joy she had felt became resentment and anger toward God. She told the pastor visiting her, "He didn't need my forgiveness. He was forgiven already. How could God forgive him even if I didn't?"

The main character in this movie got the prize for best actress at the Cannes film festival. This film even became famous because of the prize; this movie draws attention to the phenomenon of Korean Christianity today. It challenges Korean churches and Christians today. It raises the questions: What is salvation for this woman? What does God's forgiveness mean? How does building a good relationship with God work in the matter of problems between people? What does it mean to have a personal experience of salvation from God in a relationship with others?

These questions have been posed to Korean Christians who have believed "Jesus leads to heaven, unbelief to hell". You see people who evangelize with this slogan everywhere in Korea. Nobody even pays attention to them anymore. It is important for them to continue to save people until they reach the last one.

In Hebrew, the term salvation can be used to mean liberation, and vice versa. It has been used in this sense because of the Israelites' common memory and celebration of Exodus. They had been oppressed as slaves for a long time. Exodus 2:23-25 says, "During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out. Their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the

Israelites and was concerned about them.” God intervened and began to work. He chose Moses to lead His people. God delivered his people from slavery and liberated them. They praised him, “The Lord is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation. He is my God and I will praise him, my father’s God and I will exalt him. The Lord is his name.”

Salvation is liberation. Liberation is salvation. If God’s salvation can be understood as God’s liberation, what does it mean to say “Jesus saves”? It means Jesus liberates, but from what? Was the woman in the movie saved? Was she liberated? If not, what was the experience she was sharing with others? And what was it that made her go to her son’s killer?

Whenever I visit Korea, several people want to meet me and talk with me about the relationship with their spouses or in-laws. They share their difficulties in relationships but what I recognize is that they seem to jump to this conclusion automatically. Most of them say, “I know if my relationship with God was built right, these difficulties would be solved. I know I have to move closer to God with this matter. In his time, he will work. I need to be strong to wait for his time. I know I need patience.” However what I realize whenever I meet them is that the problems are still there. These people seem to suffer a double sense of guilt. On the one hand is the difficult relationship with those with whom they are supposed to have good relationship and on the other is their lack of commitment or love for God to solve the problems. They believe a more committed relationship with God will guarantee a resolved relationship with others. I am not saying the relationship with God is not important in the matter of the relationship with others. God sent his only Son to save us. It is God’s grace which does this. If I substitute ‘liberate’ for ‘save’, God wants us to be liberated from whatever we are captured by, from whatever we are oppressed by.

Romans 8:14-16 says, “You will live because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘*Abba*, Father.’ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.” God saved us through Jesus. God liberated us through Jesus. That was the purpose for Jesus being in this world. But today’s churches don’t seem to give the liberating experience to people. They use guilt as the measuring stick to push people harder to commit to God, or they give them a sugar-coated feeling of

forgiveness. I would say that when they feel they are forgiven or liberated by God, they have to check the relationship with others as well.

The woman in the movie tried to reach out to the killer, but it was not successful. What was wrong? Was her attitude in delivering the Good News to the killer wrong? No. However, it shows how fragile the individual feeling of salvation can be for a person who is assigned the task of forgiveness or reconciliation.

The individual saving experience should not be the triumphant goal of the church. Leading people to God should be the first step. But unfortunately, I would say this does not characterize the Korean Church today. When the woman in the movie was suffering with anger, even rage, toward God, people who eagerly give applause to the converted found one can not do anything. They felt so helpless. So the director is saying the churches are not where the true secret sunlight can be found. The relationship with God and the relationship with the neighbor are two sides of one coin. Both the forgiveness of God and the forgiveness of the victim are equally important in the Bible.

Maybe you remember Seung-Hee Cho from Virginia Tech who suffered from mental illness and brutally and senselessly killed his peers on the campus. They were beautiful people who had dreams and hopes in their lives. This accident caused tremendous pain to the families of the victims and also to the family of the killer. People laid stones of remembrance for them at Virginia Tech. I was told that there was a stone for Seung-Hee Cho at first but somebody took it away. How could he be mourned? How could he be remembered along with the innocent victims? It seems he could not be forgiven or remembered. How hard it would be for them to forgive him who took their loved ones' lives away. We all understand their bitterness, anger and desperation.

And you also remember the murders of the children in the Amish community in Pennsylvania. After it happened, elders of the community visited the killer's wife and children to deliver deep consolation. The Amish community gave the killer a funeral along with the funeral for the killed children. They moved the whole world because of their unexpected and forgiving action. It was an active demonstration of forgiveness. I read in an article that the elders of the Amish Community visited Virginia Tech. They wanted to deliver reconciliation and healing to the campus. They wanted people to know what real forgiveness

means and what the consequences would be. The writer mentioned at the end of the article: "In Korean churches, we were told that because we were forgiven by God, we have to forgive people who need our forgiveness. But for the Amish elders, it seemed to be the other way, like when we forgive others, then we can be forgiven."

As you know, both of these concepts are in the Bible. We were taught that we are the servant who owed ten thousand talents but was forgiven, so we have to forgive. That is true. With the grace of God our heavy burden of debt has been taken off our shoulders. We are liberated. We are free. But you know the next part of the story. When that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him saying, "Pay back what you owe me."

I am not saying most Korean Christians are like the unmerciful servant. I know many good Christians who are living as followers of Christ. I am saying how important and difficult it is to live as a saved and liberated Christian in this world. Jesus taught us the profound prayer, "And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." "As we forgive those who trespass against us" How powerful the prayer is! True liberation comes from us. Forgiveness is a powerful active demonstration of salvation. That's why Jesus invites us to do it.

When I was asked to present something under the theme of "Jesus saves", the first word that came to my mind was "liberation". Personally, I don't like the term "salvation". It has been abused during the course of church history. I have unpleasant memories associated with this term. So I prefer the term "liberation" to "salvation". When I came to realize that these two terms can be used interchangeably in a certain context, I had an *aha* experience.

Two hundred years ago, missionaries landed on the Korean peninsula to save souls. I believe they came to the strange land to be God's witnesses. And they did it very well. But now, I think it is time to reinterpret "salvation" in the present Korean context. Today's Korean Christians put too much emphasis on the "salvation of our souls, which means going to heaven through Jesus Christ." Salvation should not only be a matter of a relationship with God but also with others.

The question I am asking now is: "What should the liberating experience be within individuals, in our community and in our suffering world?" When we can answer the question, I believe that is where Jesus saves.