
12-1-1992

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Recommended Citation

Halteman Finger, Reta, "No rope let down from heaven" (1992). *Biblical, Religious, & Philosophical Studies Educator Scholarship*. 20.

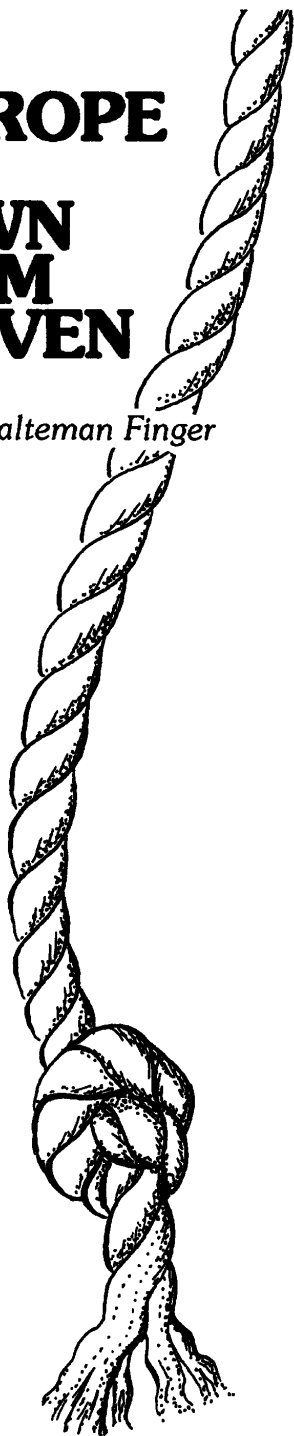
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NO ROPE LET DOWN FROM HEAVEN

by Reta Halteman Finger



Sexual assault. What experience have you had with it? What are the most important religious issues raised when a Christian woman has been sexually or physically assaulted? Andrea Smith, a young woman who works at a center for victims of sexual assault, asked these questions of the 20-some women gathered for the September discussion group of the Daughters of Sarah. Each had an opportunity to respond.

Those were sobering moments. Of those who shared, Rose had been raped, Lynn had been beaten warding off an assault, Jill (not their real names) had lost her best friend to rape and murder. Three women had been sexually abused as children. Others had friends who had been sexually assaulted.

I sat there reliving the time a woman who has become a close friend recounted to me her experience of rape of ten years earlier. Wakened from a dead sleep in the middle of the night by a masked intruder. Asked by him if she wanted to die or cooperate with him. Reporting the crime to those in civil and religious authority who only seemed to claw deeper into those searing psychic wounds. I will never forget the paralysis that spread through my own body as she went on, detail after detail, her story circumscribed by the fear that has stalked her to some extent ever since.

What then are the spiritual and religious issues a Christian victim of sexual assault must deal with as she recovers from her trauma? As we moved around the circle of Sarah's Daughters, three seemed to stand out: the curse of dominance-submission teaching, the loss of trust through lack of caring and understanding by spiritual overseers, and loss of faith because of the sense of being abandoned by God.

All three are closely related, of

course, but I would like to focus the rest of this article on the third—the despair born of the sense of God’s abandonment. My friend (let’s call her Marianna) put it so well when she said, “I had always been taught that God cares for us, and—if we live good lives—God will rescue us in our hour of greatest need. When we’re at the end of our rope, a rope is let down from heaven, as it were, to snatch us out of danger.” She had paused and shrugged her shoulders. “But for me that night there was no rope. I got raped.”

* * *

Ever since our discussion meeting I have been pondering again this idea of rescue, especially from sexual violation with its aura of shame. Be a good girl and God will take care of you. Conversely, if you’re not good and don’t obey those in authority over you, God will abandon you to the fate you deserve. We may not believe this with our heads, but our hearts do not let go so easily.

Does this religious idea of good women being rescued in the nick of time come from the Bible? Or is it only a phenomenon of white, middle-class folks seduced by Christian romance novels with their pure and pedestaled heroines? Getting back to the roots of our faith, what does the Bible really say about rescue . . . deliverance . . . salvation? Is there a theology that can speak to assault, rape, or violent death at the hands of evil men?

One form of reflection might be to make a rapid survey of the Bible, looking for stories that demonstrate God’s miraculous deliverance when someone is in a desperate situation—and stories where God seems absent. Sarah’s deliverance from Pharaoh’s harem in Genesis 12 contrasts with the tragedy awaiting Jephthah’s daughter (Judg.

11). Hagar’s vision of God and the pool of water in the desert (Gen. 21) has a different ending from the hopelessness of Tamar’s rape in II Samuel 13. Why the difference when God is supposed to be the same yesterday, today, and forever? Is there an answer?

As we women sat together in a circle that evening, talking about loss of faith in the face of sexual assault, my mind turned especially to the passion of Jesus as recorded in the gospel of Mark. Now I know that salvation through Jesus is a touchy subject when it comes to feminist theological reflection. Many women have been deeply hurt by glib answers and quick fixes derived from the Jesus story. A collection of essays called *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse* discusses some of these problems, and will be reviewed at length in a later issue of *Daughters of Sarah*.

But I am not yet ready to give up the gospel of Mark—if not as an answer to the problem of a God who abandons us—then as a story of suffering that parallels those of assault victims. It may have the power to show us how closely God in the human Jesus does identify with us in our pain.

What does the Bible say about rescue for "good" women?

The gospel of Mark was written, scholars say, to combat a “theology of glory.” It may have come from Rome where, after wondrous times and rapid growth of the church, Christians had fallen upon persecution and could not understand it. They had thought they were following a superhero, a conquering Messiah who would heal their diseases, perform mighty acts, destroy

their enemies, and soon return to set the whole world aright. How could God now abandon them to suffering and death? So Mark writes a “theology of the cross” in order to destroy the illusions of these Christians and make sense of their suffering.

Though the entire gospel is centered around the theme of the cross, I want to focus only on the last three chapters. It is a bleak story, and almost the only human comfort in it is that given by women.

Jesus’ passion begins in 14:1–2, with the chief priests and scribes plotting to kill him. Under Mark’s terse pen, events will move quickly, but first there is a still point in the turning, tumbling world: a woman anoints Jesus’ head with ointment. It is a comfort and a tribute to him, and a prescience of impending disaster. This woman knows more than the male disciples. There is trouble in the air and she has only a short time to show Jesus how much she loves him. Only he and she recognize that this anointing is for his burial.

From here on, everything slides downhill, as a sinking ship at sea slips irrevocably under murky waters. Immediately after this woman’s touch, one of Jesus’ closest male disciples begins plotting to betray him to his enemies. Even the Passover meal, that most holy night of the Jewish year, is dominated by conversation about betrayal and death. How desperately Jesus wants to hear that his friends will not desert him in his hour of greatest need—yet he knows better than to believe them.

Mark’s description of Gethsemane is equally barren. Jesus is “distressed,” “agitated,” “deeply grieved” (14:33, 34 NRSV), but unlike Luke’s account, no angel appears to strengthen him, and human support evaporates. Then comes the betrayal in the guise of

affection, the confusion of arresting soldiers—and any faint hope of deliverance is gone. In a spare, seven-word sentence (14:50), Mark says of the disciples, “All of them deserted him and fled.” Jesus is now in the hands of those who only wish him evil. My friend Marianna must have felt the same terror and despair that night alone in her house with her attacker.

Read on if you can stand it. The trial in Mark is not long, but no one comes forth as an advocate for Jesus, not even a court-appointed lawyer. After showing us how abjectly Jesus was made an object of ridicule, Mark makes another brief statement: “And they crucified him.” He does not elaborate on this ultimate indignity—feet gouged by nails supporting the body’s weight in order to breathe, sweat running into the eyes, flies sucking blood, splinters in the back, itches that cannot be scratched. Perhaps worst of all for a Jew was the shame of hanging stark naked for all the world to see—not terribly unlike rape, I imagine. But Mark’s audience needed no description; they knew what crucifixion was like. No doubt some of their own people, men and women, had endured it.

In Mark’s account Jesus is not a pious saint, but a suffering human being who feels totally abandoned. He utters only one cry from the cross, and it is not for the sake of a repentant thief (as in Luke) or for his mother (as in John). It is only for himself and it is the cry of all those who have tried to be faithful and are yet assaulted and raped: “My God, why have you forsaken me?”

Then he dies.

And that’s it. As far as he’s concerned, it’s all over. God did not take him off the cross and rescue him. As far as he’s aware, God has abandoned him.

Mark remains shockingly true to his

central theme of a theology of the cross, for even his account of the resurrection in the oldest manuscripts is brief and abrupt. Jesus has been raised, but he is not there. And the women flee from the tomb in terror and amazement, and "say nothing to anyone" (16:8). (Apparently later Christians puzzled over this abruptness and added a more optimistic and victorious ending.)

* * *

Uncomfortable though this story is, it may provide an antidote to a disillusioning theology of rescue-for-good-girls which we imbibe from our culture. If there was no rescue this side of the grave for Jesus, who at least had some choice in the matter, we cannot be sure there will be for any one of us either, in a possible hour of extremity. (I am, of course, not speaking of an ultimate deliverance and an everlasting love, which, according to all the New Testament writings, goes beyond death and becomes the legitimate ground of our joy.)

Yet in Mark's account of Jesus' passion there are bright spots at the beginning and the end—and they concern the women disciples. We have already noticed the anointer in chapter 14. But at the crucifixion, we find that not everyone has actually deserted. The group of women disciples—*many* of them—have come up from Galilee (15:40, 41) and they watch. Like the Argentinian mothers marching around the Plaza de Mayo, they make a silent vigil. No doubt they are overwhelmed by grief and rage, but they do not desert. As women they are helpless to take any direct political action, but they watch Joseph take the body down and lay it in a tomb. They prepare spices to further anoint Jesus' body for burial.

In our discussion about the religious implications of sexual assault, Wanda

said that she is sure her faith would not be able to carry her through in the face of such trauma. She would simply have to depend on the faith and faithfulness of her friends until she could regain it, just as she would want to provide that support for her friends. Jill said it took her two years after her friend's murder to be on speaking terms with God again, but that her friends in her church stood with her.

It must have been a great grief to Jesus that his male friends, with whom the culture permitted more intimacy than with women, spaced out and deserted. Would his final hours have been eased if he could have taken some of the women disciples with him to Gethsemane?

What conclusions can we draw from such a Bible study? (It is not a perfect fit, of course. Jesus knowingly took actions that brought him into conflict with the powers of evil. But no woman had a choice in her—as Anne Wilson Schaefer puts it—"original sin of being born female." Nor have I dealt with the implications of the different political conditions of first-century Palestine and 20th-century America.) Perhaps conclusions are best left up to you as readers to struggle with yourselves.

But it means something to me that Mark was at such pains to show the utter humanity of Jesus, even to his sense of abandonment by God, just as so many of us feel when we are under extreme stress.

It also encourages me to note the vital role of the women disciples in the passion story. The compassion of another human being can go a long way toward healing our own experiences of violence and assault.

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