

Sermon: "Doomed to Everlasting Happiness"
Pastor Sam Richards
August 9, 2020

Yes, it turns out that we are either doomed to everlasting happiness, or to misery—there is no Plan C. And, as it turns out, Joseph is doomed to the former, not to the latter. Of Joseph it might be said, pessimism is an unbecoming attitude. Of course, the same might be said of each and every Christian—if we are truly Christian, then we are all doomed to happiness. That is not just a good thing, it's a great thing. I think that it is fair to state that for every calamity about to befall the human race, in our perilous stay on this wobbling planet, that God has made provision—he has raised up either a Noah, or a Joseph for global challenges. In fact this pattern is familiar from the Bible. It figures highly in the Book of Judges—either God was rescuing, or the people of God were repenting in the cycle of "obey and prosper, disobey and perish." But for really big deals, like a severe seven year worldwide famine, or a Flood aimed at destroying all the wicked, God fashions a deliverance, replete with a deliverer. Moses was a mediator for the enormous crisis of Israel's deliverance from bondage in Egypt. He falls between the two extremes of national deliverance (the judges who arose to liberate the oppressed nation) and worldwide catastrophes (wherein the whole human race is faced with extinction). All of this comes, of course, from the goodness of God. God so esteems the human soul that he framed Creation for man (See Psalm 8), creating a being who can know, experience, enjoy and imbibe in that creation fully—either in oneself, or vicariously through others. Secondly, God gave himself for man, becoming incarnate so as to suffer and die for the salvation of our souls, and, thirdly, God carried our humanity to heaven in the glorified and risen Lord Jesus. Our nature is exalted there, above all principality! Fourthly, God has promised to return in his glory to settle all accounts, all outstanding affairs in mercy and justice—so that evil is punished, and righteousness obtains its due reward. ***Because God so esteems the human soul, he has doomed it to either Everlasting Happiness, or Misery.*** The yardstick of his estimate of the human soul, so to speak, extends from the highest heaven to the lowest abyss in hell; the soul cannot be higher in estimation than that.

As a parallel to the Joseph narrative, Joseph managed the food supply to meet the need and to forestall inevitable food wars (as well as to exalt and prosper Pharaoh!), we have the account of an American soldier, a World War II veteran who was awarded a presidential citation "for promoting peace and harmony among the prisoners by implementing and overseeing a program of careful measurement and distribution of the meager supplies provided for those in the camp" (A Japanese Prisoner of War Camp). This is an uncanny parallel to Joseph's tour as governor of Egypt during the seven years of harvest, followed by seven years of famine! This soldier exemplifies "how we save our lives by giving them up in service of others." After several years in that camp, he observed "that those who thought only of themselves, hoarding up what little food they could beg, borrow or steal, often crawled in a corner and died. Strangely, those who sought to care for others, even by giving generously of their own supplies, survived. Ministering to others has a most beneficial effect upon those who serve." as cited by Robert L. (Bob) Deffinbaugh, 40. "How to Get Out of a Pit," May 12, 2004: <https://bible.org/seriespage/how-get-out-pits-genesis-401-23>. I wonder as I write this if anyone has done a study on the relationship between ministry and minister's longevity—Baptist ministers typically greatly exceed the national averages!

Pondering this example biblically took me to two passages: Matthew 16:25-26 and John 4:1-44 (Jesus' "messianic" encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well in Sychar).

25 For whoever wishes to save his [lit.soul] life will lose it; but whoever loses his [lit. soul] life for My sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?

When Jesus says something, because he is the eternal word, what he says is the final word on that subject. But as a property of that finality, it follows that his final word has always been final. The truth that Jesus unveils here may have been stumbled across by others who preceded him, like Joseph, but they did so unknowingly. The Americans in the POW camp struggled with want and deprivation—doing without was a way of life—and Joseph also did without. It taught him to rely on God, it developed his strength and faith. And he learned that God alone is God and that God alone is in charge of his circumstances.

Only God could rescue Joseph from the pit *into which he had been thrown*—and, eventually, God led him out and into the Governor's mansion. Joseph was unjustly accused (and slandered). Potiphar's wife didn't scream, to protect herself from the charge of consensual sex (adultery) with Joseph whom she lured after; she lied about that. She was one of a number of sexually aggressive women in the Bible. Like Jezebel, this woman was not accustomed to being refused, or rejected; she was probably a lovely, pampered woman. I share this to establish Joseph was not in prison because of something he did (a punishment) and in this he differs from both the baker and the cupbearer. The latter two, royal prisoners had greatly offended Pharaoh—perhaps, were implicated in a treasonous plot (and only one was guilty as charged). Joseph was there in that pit because God had work for him to do there! I find "the pit" amusing because it was the name for detention hall at St. John's School—where rascals and miscreants were sent, early in the morning (that was the exquisiteness of the punishment for teenagers). I often was the attending master because I went into school early (to avoid Houston traffic and to get my school preparations done). Part from that, "the pit" is truly not funny. Joseph was sentenced to time in the pit with no end in view—all he could hope for was a reprieve from higher up, from Pharaoh, perhaps. He named his injustice, but did not complain. By the time he ascended to the governorship, the salacious charges on his character had been elevated to irrelevance—they no longer mattered and, by a twist of divine destiny, Joseph, the former slave, was now over Potiphar (and Potiphar's wife). Joseph chose not to retaliate indicating his "spiritual maturity"—it is an early example of this character trait (later displayed in spades with his cruel, unrepentant brothers who have yet to recognize who he is).

What was the secret to his not complaining? Perhaps Joseph had realized that despite the high calling on his life, *he did not deserve it all!* God is under no obligation to make us healthy, wealthy and happy—except in those things that he has obligated himself by covenant, decree and promises. He has constrained himself to be merciful and compassionate—even when our fear, and misery blinds us to His kindnesses. That God is so kind to creatures such as ourselves is truly astonishing. Paul asserts that he has learned to be content regardless of his circumstances; perhaps he was following Joseph's clear example. See James 1:2-4 for the apostolic attitude towards unjust suffering—which they learned from Jesus, Jesus who led the way through suffering to glory and exaltation:

2 Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various [temptations] trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces [steadfastness] endurance. 4 And let [c]endurance have its perfect [work] result, so that you may be [mature] perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

11 All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. (Hebrews 12:11)

The watchword for Christians in the midst of suffering is not escape, but endurance.

10 After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you. (1 Peter 5:10)

I underscored “mature,” “righteousness” and “perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you” because, while Joseph was doing what God had for him to do in the pit, God was fashioning Joseph into the godly leader he was called to become. God works on us while we serve one another. This ties into Matthew 16:25-26 beautifully. Suffering, discomfort, deprivation, trials, temptations and persecutions are part of the whole life package—they won’t go away, or be wished away because they are the means that God employs to shape and define us—what happens to us are hammer blows on the chisel! We are sculpted by events—even as we engaged in serving Christ through serving one another. Those who live for themselves, like Potiphar’s wife, are leeches, not contributors; they wither and die. Because he served others, Joseph did not wallow in self-pity (much too busy for that!)—like I said, there’s lots of ministry to be engaged in—and, actually, his service becomes his way out of the pit. Had he not been compassionate to the baker and cupbearer, his name would never have surfaced when Pharaoh, perplexed by his troubling dreams, needed an interpreters—and the Egyptians diviners were, of course, clueless! Who have ever heard of seven lean cows eating seven fat cows?! Really now.

Jesus taught, as I must suffer, so must all my followers suffer. This is a different kind of following than the moral kind we usually ascribe to. It relates to the unworldly kingdom (**not of this world**) which Jesus proclaimed. If any man wilted, that is desert to come after me, it is going to be extremely costly. He will have to deny his whole self—all his natural motives and impulses, renouncing any and all things contrary to the commands, urgings of Christ. It’s total obedience, or it’s a masked denial of Christ. The technical terms for this self-emptying is *kenosis*—whereby Jesus emptied himself of his divine attributes to enter fully into our human condition and die for us as man for man. The disciples wanted a ruler who would by force of arms, conquer and deliver over to them a worldly kingdom—which means they had taken their eyes off the ball. The pathway was resurrection, not conquest. Renovation not elimination. It’s free, non-compulsory but has to meet some exacting conditions.

The woman at the well. We mentioned John 4 earlier. We must delve into that somewhat. She was living for herself, as best she could manage and what did it avail her? She ended up degraded, laden with rejection. **You have had five husbands and the one you are with is not your husband.** (v.18) She is exhausted by man-pleasing, without honor and direction in her life—it doesn’t have to be a literal pit, now does it? So what does Jesus do: he engages with her, he lifts her out of her pit, he introduces himself to her as Messiah. The true method of salvation is a great venture of self which entails a forgetfulness of self—a going out of the self! Losing one’s soul in Christ’s great endeavor: alleviating misery, instructing spiritual ignorance, reforming some vice, healing the sick, delivering those oppressed by evil spirits and mental illnesses, pulling the broken pieces back together, knitting together, making whole again. Yes, engaging in Kingdom work for Christ *to the glory of God!*

For such things as this, Jesus urges us to fling our souls away—live with such extravagance as to die for it—**then it will come back to you: purified, strengthened, glorified, renewed. Yes, resurrected.** So this woman is a dead man walking when we first meet her but she drinks of living water, from Christ's own words, and what we see next is a woman alive, skipping, dancing, running and rejoicing—quite oblivious to all the joy she is showering on her way! “Come, come and see . . . here's the Promised One, the Messiah (**she didn't know him as Jesus!**). . . he's here . . . he's the fountain of forgiveness, the river of grace . . . friends, neighbors, come partake of this living water. Come, meet God. **He's told me everything I ever did** and yet still loves me. Have you ever been known like that!? She is happy.

Now that, I would say, sounds like a woman fulfilled in ways that lust and sexual adventurism could never do because her new life is selfless, freed, pure and holy . . . surely this is life as it is meant to be. What did Jesus do? He saved her soul. He dignified her, he honored her and he elevated her. What did she do? She leapt to the work of an evangelist for that was her true calling: **O Come and see.** She leapt as one doomed to happiness.

“If Christ be (as we believe) the very and eternal word of God, the very expression of the Father's truth, righteousness, purity love; then the sacrifice of self to any [or all] of these is a saving of the soul by losing it!” -W. A. Adeney

So, when two royal prisoners show up in Potiphar's basement dungeon, Joseph is on hand to serve them. they are very perplexed by two dreams, one for each of them and they have no access to Egyptain diviners who consulted their gods—these professionals to wrote the book on dreams!—the diviners handled ordinary dreams routinely. For pay. The prison had no dream therapists on staff, unfortunately—despite being a royal prison. And because Joseph is not focused on himself, he notices their disconcerted looks and unhappiness. **Do not interpretations belong to God. Please tell them to me.** (v.8) The cupbearers dream has a positive outcome—three days and you will be restored. **Only remember me when it is well with you and please god the kindness of mentioning me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this house.** (v. 14) There is no other prime source for Pharaoh's good reputation except that of Potiphar who bought Joseph and then befriended and advanced him. **For I have done nothing wrong that they should put me in this pit.** (v. 15) When the baker saw how swimmingly it went with the cupbearer, he also shared his dream. His outcome was not so optimistic. He was slated to be beheaded in three days as a just punishment of his crime/offenses. In three days.

Three days and Pharaoh would be a happy man because ti was his birthday. There would be a huge celebration—fit for a king, only kings in Egypt were pharaohs. He could be expected to be felicitous—it was a day for pardons!— but not to the point of overlooking all crimes against the state. But was the punishment changed for the baker: **he was hanged?** Not at all, probably the decapitated body was hung on a tree—a final ignominy to the body of a traitor (who the Targum records had plotted to kill Pharaoh).

Well, God demonstrated his power to interpret, Joseph's reputation was vindicated as an interpreter, **but the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him . . . for two whole years when Pharaoh dreamed . . . there came up out of Nile seven attractive and plump cows . . .** (41:1-2) It did not turn out as Joseph had hoped but apparently there was a clean-up operation in the prison as far as he was concerned. He would finish that assignment just in time to interpret the troubling dream of Pharaoh who did have access to the magicians and wise men, but **none could interpret them to Pharaoh. Amen.**