

Escaping Sisyphus

Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-22

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When my son was tiny, before the age of memory, I would sing him this song as we readied for bed. By God's miracle, the sad tune of my voice did not matter; he simply heard the words with wonder and mystery as they lulled him to sleep.

In the deepest ocean
The bottom of the sea
Your eyes
They turn me

Why should I stay here?
Why should I stay?
I'd be crazy not to follow
Follow where you lead
Your eyes
They turn me

Turn me on to phantoms
I follow to the edge
Of the earth
And fall off
Yeah, everybody leaves
If they get the chance
And this is my chance

I get eaten by the worms
And weird fishes
Picked over by the worms
And weird fishes

I'll hit the bottom
Hit the bottom and escape
I'll hit the bottom
Hit the bottom to escape
Escape
Escape

- *Arpeggi/Weird Fishes* by Radiohead (2007)

In my opinion, the most colorful character in all of Greek mythology was this guy named Sisyphus. Upon the first occasion that it was his time to die, he instead found a way to chain the god of death, Thanatos, to the underworld so that he could escape his fate and live again (and as a consequence no mortal died for quite some time, well, until Thanatos was freed, and sickness and death resumed their normal programming).

The second time that it was his time to die, he found Hades, the god of the underworld, and he chained him up too, repeating what he did to Thanatos and again, escaping death.

The third time that it was his time to die, Sisyphus asked his wife, Merope, to help him. Abiding by his plan, she threw his body down the river Styx where he then floated into the underworld. But when he got there, he found the goddess Persephone and told her that the plan was actually his wife's doing, and that she should be punished instead of him. And, you know what? It somehow worked! Persephone freed him, Merope was punished, and Sisyphus lived again.

Now eventually all of his luck ran out. So angered was the council at Olympus by this endless trickery and evasion, that they all got together and thought of the most elegant and inescapable punishment imaginable. Sisyphus was to be sentenced to the eternal task of rolling a huge boulder up and over a steep hill; only for its momentum to stop right before the peak and roll all the way back down again. His ultimate fate was to start over and try again, on repeat; and that he did, every minute of every day for the rest of time. That dude is still down there trying. In futility.

Perhaps his punishment was rather severe. But perhaps it was also somewhat deserved. After all, Sisyphus was neither generous nor kind, neither hospitable nor inclined towards any sort of charity. He was the first king of a city he founded named Ephyra (later known as Corinth) and he was said to be especially shrewd and remarkably deceitful in nearly all of his dealings, both in his life on earth and the one that followed in the underworld. It is said that he advanced his city into a buzzing hub for commercialization and trade by cheating merchants and contractors out of their money, and issuing warrants upon his guests' and travelers' heads unless he took what was theirs and they quietly acquiesced. He was consumed, my friends, consumed by his riches and notoriety, his false air of wisdom and his narcissistic individualism, and by his endless need to accumulate and grow his empire, that he did whatever he could to get ahead and stay ahead and stay alive doing so.

No wonder then when faced with death and the reality of total loss, he chose to do whatever he could to cheat it. To run from it. To dive deep into his substantial bag of tricks, clutching after and holding on to all that he had come to gain and possess.

In Mark's gospel, we meet a man who is also said to be rich in possessions and concerned with dying and living again. "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" he asks Jesus.

Jesus immediately puts him on the spot. "Well, why do you call me good?" This question is so surprising if not startling, that certain scholars suggest that it was designed to cause the man to

stop and think for a moment about who he was putting the question to; to stop and think about who Jesus really was.¹ Jesus' response "Well, why do you call me good?" was basically, *come on man. Don't you know? Haven't you heard by now? I was literally just talking about it a verse or two ago.*

So Jesus again lists the commandments that the man is familiar with. "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother." And the man excitedly interrupts Jesus and exclaims, *oh I've done all of those! I'm good then! Thanks Jesus!*

Jesus then, it is said, "looks at him and loved him." Basically like how a parent looks at their child with a tilt and a smile when they know their kid is either hiding something or not fully comprehending what it is being said. *Oh, Timmy... sure you have understood, sure, you sweet boy.*

You only lack one thing, Jesus explains to the man (which is an interesting play on words, as the man lacks nothing that is considered valuable in society): charity. Share with others what you've come to know and own, and then, you'll be able to live the way you seek and ought, he says. Here is your chance. To leave it all behind and live for something even greater. Follow me.

Well, the man of many possessions was so greatly disappointed by this that he went away grieving. Poor man, too great and many were the things that he owned! *I earned those riches, he thought! I am entitled to these things, he demanded! No way am I just going to give them up, to follow this guy to the bottom, to the edge of the earth.*

No way!

"And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account (Hebrews 4:13)."

At the end our days, when all secrets are told, how do we want to be remembered? What do we want our obituary to say and the eulogy to communicate?

Maybe it's strange for a man turning 40, but I often think about my memorial service. What scripture would I want read, what hymn would I want sung, who would get to do the remembrance and how many people would show up. But the thing that sometimes keeps me awake, or, that keeps me awake longer than I'm already awake, is hoping that whoever speaks on my account believes, at least, that I lived a life that actually made a bit of difference. I don't want people to hear about the lenses in my camera bag, the rare bottle of scotch in my cabinet, or the shuffleboard table in my basement. No, I want others to hear about the mission trips I went on. The adventures we had. The kindness that I thought I showed others. The people who I thought I inspired. The generosity I hoped that I offered, in time, emotion, and energy.

¹ NET Bible Commentary

Who cares about *things* when life is gone? For life to live on, it must go on in its effect on others.

And so, I often wonder about that man, who left grieving for his riches rather than following Christ. Did he enjoy the rest of his days? Was his life and others' made better because of all that he had and hoarded? Or did he perhaps go on his way a little bit lonelier? And more disappointed? Frustrated by regret and sadness and insignificance? Refusing to follow Jesus up the hill, did he ultimately suffer under the weight of his own boulder, of excess, until it rolled back down and crushed him in the end?

I wonder.

“That is why faith, wherever it develops into hope, causes not rest but unrest, not patience but impatience. It does not calm the unquiet heart, but is itself this unquiet heart in man. Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it. Peace with God means conflict with the world, for the goal of the promised future stabs into the flesh of every unfulfilled present.”

— Jürgen Moltmann

To be at conflict with the world means also to escape from its routines. Its ways and coercions. Its false reality as it presents it, that we either knowingly or not yet suffer under.

The truth is we can't thrive in this version of reality. This world we live in of hyper-consumerism, hyper-individualism, and hyper-capitalism. We can't remain here or stay the course if we also want to inherit the Kingdom. Sure we might find easier rest here, at times, but we will never be at greater peace. No, we will get picked over by the worms and weird fishes, corrupt systems and politicians, and nothing as it is presently will lead to a healthier future, without a desire and a true commitment to change.

So, today we must choose to change. We must choose to escape. Our old ways and lives. Our old thoughts and habits. This is our chance, my friends. We have heard the Word! This is our chance to follow a savior who calls us beyond the superficial and the artificial, and towards something deeper and more powerful. Towards our meaning and purpose -- a life created not for accumulation, vanity, and futility, but for service, stewardship, and giving.

Jesus calls us to metaphorically hit the bottom. To approach the edge so that we and others might live and live better. So that all might be reformed into who were meant and called to be as the community of God, elected to freely enjoy this one life together with shared gifts, shared talents, and shared ministry.

My friends, we'd be crazy not to follow.

To follow where he leads.

Amen.