

## ENGAGING WITH THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION – Peter Drey?

It's our final tonight of engaging with Sheffield Hallam's top four times. And tonight we come to the film which is at the very top of the Internet Movie Database's top films, and a film that is regularly voted as the most inspirational ever made: *The Shawshank Redemption*. It was such a pleasure to watch the film again just recently as I prepared for tonight. *The Shawshank Redemption* is a truly moving piece of work that left me with a lump in my throat even as I watched it again.

Now as I've come to the film afresh and thought about how to engage with it, I pondered a question: who gets redeemed? The film is called the *Shawshank Redemption* – so who gets redeemed? 'Redemption' means the payment of a price in order to set someone free. The name of the film has been deliberately chosen. So who gets set free?

Is it the Warden, a hypocritical man who claims to be a Christian but oversees a brutal regime that is anything but Christlike? No, he ends the movie with a bullet through his head. Is it Andy Dufresne? No, he's not freed from anything. He escapes. He breaks out from Shawshank prison hanging onto the last shreds of his humanity, but hanging onto them nonetheless.

No, a little thought about the film will tell you that the one who gets redeemed is Red, Andy's fellow prisoner, the character brilliantly played by Morgan Freeman. So tonight I want us to think more about this redemption and the freedom that Red receives from Andy.

Before we do so, let me just summarise Red and Andy's relationship, for anyone here that's not seen the film. As we meet Red early on in the film, we discover he is a hardened prisoner. He's become accustomed to life in Shawshank, a jail where almost unimaginable evil occurs day to day. Red has carved out for himself a role within Shawshank. He's the guy who can get things from the outside world inside. Early on in the film, Red makes bet on the first new prisoner to cry and on Andy's first night, he bets on Andy. As it turns out, Andy doesn't cry at all. And from that, Andy and Red form a friendship – one of the most compelling on-screen friendships ever portrayed.

So how does Andy 'redeem' Red? How does he set him free? I want to suggest he does so in four ways.

Firstly, **Andy gives Red a taste for life beyond his present reality.**

Time and again inside Shawshank Prison, Andy lifts the eyes of his fellow prisoners to life outside Shawshank as the true reality. The prisoners' problem is that they have become institutionalised, having spent forty years within its walls. Shawshank has become their reality. As horrible a place as it is, the prisoners can't imagine life anywhere else.

Andy begins to change this in the prisoners. He uses his influence and background to help the prison guards with their tax returns for just one thing – some ice cool beer for his fellow prisoners as they

tar the prison roof. Cold beer is something they've not had for decades: it's as if they've even forgotten it existed.

On another occasion, Andy breaks into the room where the prison intercom is. A donation to the library has just provided Andy with the opera "The Marriage of Figaro". He plays it over the public address system for all the inmates to hear, well-aware of the punishment of solitary confinement he will receive for the brief moment of bliss. Let's watch this scene. Play particular notice to what Red says about this experience.

[CLIP]

For the briefest of moments all the men at Shawshank felt free. Late in the movie Andy says solitary confinement was worth it because you need music so that you don't forget there's a place inside you "they" can't touch. Andy gives Red and the other prisoners a taste for life beyond his present reality, life in Shawshank.

The second way that Andy redeems Red is that **he gives him everything he needs to get outside of prison**. Red has suffered at the hands of the parole board that meets with him every ten years to decide whether or not he's rehabilitated enough to be allowed back into society. We don't have enough time to consider this in detail – and I don't want to ruin the film for those who haven't seen it – but Andy's friendship with Red so changes him that he is changed and freed from prison.

I guess that that's where most of us would stop thinking about freedom. We might expect the film to end with Red having been freed from prison – he's been redeemed, right? I guess if most of us were asked about what freedom is, we'd say something like the ability to do what we want, to choose whatever we want, without others interfering.

I think this is where the genius of the film kicks in. Because the Shawshank Redemption's answer is 'no': there has to be more to freedom than just being freed from certain authorities or powers that prevent us from making the choices we want or doing what we want.

And the film makes this point through the character of Brooks. Brooks is one of Shawshank's oldest residents. He suddenly gets released after spending the majority of his life in prison. He's free from prison. But let's watch a clip of what happens to Brooks on the outside.

[CLIP]

Brooks is physically free. In some ways, he's never had more freedom. But would any of us say that Brooks was really free? He has freedom, he does not know what to do with it. The freedom he has is like an astronaut cut loose from a spaceship – free; but terrifyingly and bewilderingly free.

Here's the point that the film makes, then. True freedom is not only being freed from your past and from evil authorities that might restrict you. In order to experience true freedom, you need not only to be freed *from* something, but freed *for* something else.

And that brings us to our third point. **Andy redeems Red by offering him a relationship, a hope and a future worth living for.**

Andy knows that there's a very real danger than, when he's finally out of Shawshank, Red will suffer exactly the same fate as Brooks. And so Andy starts influencing Red so that, when he's out, he knows what to do with his new-found freedom. Andy tells Red about a town in Mexico called Zihuatanejo; a completely new place next to the beach. There Andy says, he'll make a new life; next to the Pacific Ocean where he can live out a completely fresh start. He'll run a hotel and restore old boats. And he invites Red to join him as he does so. Remember Red's job inside the prison? He's the man who knows how to get things. And in one of the most tender moments of the film, Andy says to Red about his future plans, "You know, in a place like that, I could use a man who knows how to get things."

Do you see just how beautiful that offer is? Andy invites Red to enjoy true freedom: *freedom from* the evil prison officers, freedom from Shawshank, freedom from the past that has dogged him, but also *freedom to* achieve his purpose, and freedom to do that in relationship. Red will not only be physically free in the way that Brooks was, but he'll be free to be himself and free to experience his purpose in a completely new world where he can have a fresh start.

Now one of the premises that has undergirded this week is that our favourite films speak of the desires that we have within us. I guess there's no-one here that would turn down the chance to experience the quality of freedom that Red has with Andy at the end of the film. And as a Christian this week, I've sought to demonstrate that our very deepest desires that our favourite films portray – the desire for a relationship with a perfect father, the desire to be forgiven and to experience closure from guilt and so on – are all ultimately met in Jesus. And tonight I want to show you that following Jesus will also ultimately bring you freedom; the sort of beautiful freedom that we see metaphorically pictured by Red.

I want us to think about this through the experience of a man called Paul. Like Red, Paul was a prisoner at many points of his life. In fact, the section of the Bible you have in front of you was written by Paul as he rotted in a Roman prison. In fact, as a prisoner on Death Row, Paul wasn't sure whether he'd even be freed; whether he'd live or whether he'd die.

Let's read what Paul wrote together:

And I trust that my life will bring honour to Christ, whether I live or die. <sup>21</sup>For to me, living means living for Christ, and dying is even better. <sup>22</sup>But if I live, I can do more fruitful work for Christ. So I really don't know which is better. <sup>23</sup>I'm torn between two desires: I long to go and

be with Christ, which would be far better for me. <sup>24</sup>But for your sakes, it is better that I continue to live.

Now Paul is a prisoner. But it's pretty obvious reading this passage that he has hope. He's not despairing. And I wonder if you noticed verse 21 – he's not even despairing of the fact that he might be put to death. He even says, "dying is even better" than living. And here's the thing: Paul is writing as one who has been redeemed by Jesus.

Remember how we said it's as if Andy lifted the prisoners' eyes to a greater reality beyond Shawshank. They just couldn't imagine life outside of Shawshank. That is just a small picture of how Jesus lifted people's eyes to a greater reality than the world they could see and touch and feel. The quality of Jesus' life, his teaching and his miracles – supremely his resurrection from the dead – are a clear sign to us like music over the intercom that there is reality beyond what we can physically see. Jesus showed us what it means to truly be free.

And what Jesus taught and shows us about freedom is that it is much more than just the ability to choose whatever we want. If that was the case, you might think that ultimate freedom was freedom from even God. Here's the tragedy of much Western thought in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: we think our freedom has come precisely because we've walked out on God. It's as if we've grown up. But Jesus shows us that it's exactly the other way around: we're not free – and it's precisely the fact that we've walked out on God that has left us in chains.

We're like fish. We're like fish who, in the name of freedom, have jumped out of the river and we've rolled down the bank and across onto the towpath. The river was the environment that the fish was made for. There, in the river, the fish was free; free to be fully fish. Out of the river, it's not free at all. It's flapping around, out of control. And the thing is; the fish can't get itself back into the river. It needs someone to intervene.

Here's the point. The environment that we as humans were made to live in was the environment of relationship where we love God above all. That is when we are free to be fully human, to love God above all. But in the name of freedom, we've walked out on that – and now we're not free. We look at a world and it's not free. We look at our lives and we don't experience true freedom. Somehow – if we're ever to be free – we need to be brought back into that relationship with God.

And that brings us to the crux of the Christian good news. At the cross, Jesus – God himself – takes our punishment. As the perfect human – the only human who's ever been truly free because he always loved his Father above all – Jesus dies in our place and in our shoes. In his love for us, Jesus takes all of the consequences of our turning our backs on God. And, in that respect, Jesus offers humans the way to be brought back into the environment they were made for. Just as a person might throw a fish in the towpath back into the river, so Jesus does everything to offer to bring us



back into relationship with God. That is a relationship that starts now with a completely fresh start and it is perfected beyond death. It is the ultimate hope, relationship and future we were made for.

That's how Paul can say, "For to me, living means living for Christ, and dying is even better." The Christian hope is that, one day, beyond our deaths or Jesus' return, we will experience the relationship we were made for in its fullness. The Bible story ends with all of those who have trusted Jesus experiencing their very deepest desires fully satisfied by Jesus in the relationship with God we were made and saved for. In that respect, Christians are not living for this life, but the next one. That is where history is heading for all those who trust Jesus.

But here's the thing. In the meantime, you can start experiencing that relationship. Paul gives us a hint of this, when he says, "For to me, living means living for Christ." You can start experiencing that relationship with God through Christ even today. You can start the journey of knowing complete acceptance by God through Jesus' death in our place right away now. And that is satisfying. It is the relationship we were made for.

Living in relationship with God means loving him and loving like him. And that's why Paul hopes that he'll ultimately stay alive a while longer. It's not because he thinks death is the end, as we've seen. In fact, death is the best possible outcome for him personally, as verse 23 says. But when we get to know the God of the Bible, we learn that living for number 1 isn't the best way of living. That's not the way God himself loves. He loves to spread his love to others. And that's why Paul ultimately hopes he can stay alive. Paul can see ways of serving those he's writing to. And so he writes: "For your sakes, it is better that I continue to live." That's why Christianity is not a massive suicide cult. We wait for the relationship to be perfected and to fully experience our purpose beyond death. But in the meantime, we can start living out the relationship with God by loving as he loves out of the love he has shown us. Perhaps that's the best metaphor of freedom the Bible could paint for us. Perhaps that's the reason we so love the Shawshank Redemption, because deep in us we know the best freedom is freedom with a best friend who has done everything so that we can enjoy that love and friendship forever – in the Biblical story, even beyond death.

You'll never know true freedom until you know the relationship you were made for. Will you enter this relationship tonight through Jesus?

