

Life Is Beautiful

1 Corinthians 15:19-26

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The 1998 film "Life is Beautiful" is a soaring testimony to the invincibility of the human spirit. It's the story of an Italian Jew named Guido, his gentile wife Dora, and their son Joshua. Guido is an incurable stand-up comic, and I spent the first thirty minutes laughing myself hoarse. But it's the late 1930s, and before long Guido and five-year-old Joshua are rounded up and shoved into a box car headed for a Nazi concentration camp. Dora demands to be taken as well; she will not be separated from her husband and child. At the camp the women and girls are taken off in one direction, the men and boys in another. A burly SS guard who doesn't speak a word of Italian calls for a translator so he can explain the camp rules to the new prisoners. Guido volunteers, even though he doesn't understand a word of German. As the guard barks out his orders in German, Guido tells the startled prisoners that this is just a game, that each day they will be earning points, and that the first to earn a thousand points will win a full-size tank as a prize. His primary audience, of course, is his five-year-old son who is holding in his hands his favorite toy, a tiny tank. Guido knows that if Joshua is to live through this hellish experience, he must believe that the hunger and the cold and the pain he will undergo are part of a noble plan in which he will be the grand winner.

Guido is the film's Christ-figure. He sacrifices again and again to feed and protect his son. In the end, as Allied forces approach the camp and the German guards prepare to flee, Guido leaves his son in a hiding place while he goes in search of Dora. But searchlights pin him down, and a soldier marches him down a dark alley. There is a burst of gunfire and the soldier walks out of the alley alone. That's when a huge lump seized my throat and the tears started flowing down my cheeks. Moments later the guards are gone and an eerie silence settles over the camp. Dazed prisoners stumble out of their barracks and start walking toward freedom, Dora among them. Eventually, Joshua walks out into the compound and stands there, all alone. And then you hear it, the distant rumble of a powerful diesel engine. The sound grows until, suddenly, a huge Sherman tank rolls into the camp and grinds to a halt three feet from the mesmerized little boy whose father had been earning points every day to win this grand prize. "It's true!" the boy shouts. The hatch opens, and a smiling GI invites Joshua to go for a ride. And as they move slowly along the road filled with survivors, Joshua spots his mother and leaps off the tank, shouting, "Mamma, we won, we won, we won."

But are there any winners? In a world of concentration camps and ethnic cleansing, dare anyone say that life is beautiful? Is it not more honest to say LIFE IS PERISHABLE? The Bible does not disagree with that viewpoint. The words "death," "dead," and "die" occur five times in the eight verses I just read from 1 Corinthians. And Paul later concludes, "If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'" (vs. 32) That aphorism, by the way, was not original with Paul. He copied it word for word from Isaiah 22:13. Nor was it original with Isaiah. It can be found in the writings of the ancient Egyptians, who had a blunt way of illustrating it. At their banquets, Egyptians displayed an actual skeleton to remind their guests of the brevity of life. Can you imagine attending a fancy ball at the Washington Hilton and seeing on the dais not flowers but a skeleton? If it's Halloween, then yes, hang up all the skeletons you want as long as they're made out of green cardboard as if to say, "I'm not real. You don't have to be afraid of me." But the Egyptians knew better, and perhaps it is not so macabre as it seems to remind ourselves that life is perishable.

And if life is perishable, then we must also say that LIFE IS PITIFUL. Paul admits as much: "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." (vs. 19)

At two a.m. one morning I sat across from a man in his tiny Spokane apartment while he held a shot gun on his knees with which he threatened to take his life. All but a single ounce of hope had drained out of his heart, yet with that single ounce he had picked up the phone and called the crisis clinic, and the clinic had called me. For an hour he talked about the failure of his marriage, the loss of his family, the betrayal of his hopes, the dashing of his dreams. And for an hour I tried to persuade him that life was more than a perishable and pitiful existence, in fact that God so loved the world, so loved him, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him would not perish but have eternal life. So if his life was not exactly beautiful at the moment, it was redeemable. That's what I tried to tell that man so many years ago.

And that's what Guido was telling his son through those terrifying months of confinement. He wanted his son to believe in life, to cling to the future, to cherish his dreams, to play the game. And God wants us to believe in life, to cling to the future, to cherish our dreams, to play the game. Yes, we sometimes feel shackled by our sins and are oppressed by the finality of death. But there is one whose sacrifice on a Jerusalem hillside and whose resurrection from the tomb have won for us liberation from the prison camp of sin and release from the verdict of eternal death. Against all the evidence to the contrary, we point to Jesus Christ for proof that, in the end, LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL. For we live under the rainbow of this promise: "Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death." (Vs. 24-25)

You're wondering about the man with the gun across his knees? I received a letter from him several months later, in fact just before Easter. He said he was attending worship services near his apartment. And the life he had thought perishable and pitiful, had once again become a thing of beauty. The love of God had gripped his heart. The promise of forgiveness had wiped clean his past failures. His hope was like an anchor flung into the future, and now he was moving confidently toward the promise of new life.

If to you Jesus Christ is already a living presence and your personal friend, you know what I'm saying is true. But if you are carrying a lifetime's regret and are afraid of an uncertain future, Jesus Christ is waiting to lift your burden and to take your hand. "I came that you may have life and have it abundantly," he promised. This Easter, receive Christ as Savior and friend. Give him a chance to prove that he can make your life both abundant and beautiful.

