

"I deserve a happy ending"

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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Occasionally, a word or a phrase encountered in everyday discourse will jump out and lodge itself in my brain for the rest of the day—or at least until I blog about it! This morning, I was listening to a radio program discussing a certain person who had been the victim of some terrible crimes, the unlikelihood of “justice” being done in this case, the effects this was having upon them, etc, etc. It was an interview that spoke of sadness and regret, anger and pain. Near the end, the topic turned to the uncertainty of what lay ahead for this person who had been victimized in a variety of ways. He wasn’t sure about specific next steps, but he were certain of one thing: “I deserve a happy ending.”

It’s an interesting idea—that this person, or anyone else, *deserves* a happy ending. One should always be wary, I suppose, of subjecting any singular, isolated statement to overly rigorous analysis, but this little phrase has me thinking today. Is this statement simply a reflection of an individual’s psychological state, with a bit of urgency tacked on? Is it just another way of saying “I hope” for a happy ending or “I would really like” a happy ending? Is the word “deserve” substituted to focus attention upon horrors already been endured—as if life were some kind of karmic calculation whereby enduring x amount of hardship means that y amount of goodness or pleasure is due? Are we in the realm of psychology or ontology here—does “I deserve a happy ending” merely reflect our own wishful projections or does it point to something objectively real about the nature and destiny of humanity and the cosmos?

The Bible, of course, has the odd thing to say about what we “deserve,” and it’s not exactly pleasant reading. What we *deserve*, according to the Apostle Paul and others, is *death*. We are “by nature objects of wrath,” according to Ephesians 2.

Objects of wrath. By *nature*—simply because of who/what we are as sinners who have always chosen self over God. Strong words about what we deserve. Of course, this isn't *all* that the Bible has to say on the matter (thank God!), but the idea that to whatever extent we “deserve” anything from God or the world, it is anything but a happy ending seems like a fairly inescapable conclusion from Scripture.

Come to think of it, though, there are few religious traditions or philosophies that claim we *deserve* a happy ending. Salvation, enlightenment, nirvana, escape, heaven, etc are rarely (if ever) described as *deserved*.

It's difficult to squeeze anything like a “deserved” happy ending from a strictly materialistic worldview, either. We are “owed” precisely nothing by a universe characterized by, as Richard Dawkins has so cheerfully put it, “blind, pitiless indifference.” Our endings are the same as our beginnings and middles—purposeless and amoral. Whatever our worldview, it seems, we are not owed a happy ending.

And

yet, we can't seem to shake this idea that there is goodness in our future. I continue to meander my way through Eric Weiner's [Man Seeks God](#), and it has been fascinating to observe the author's approach to religion and spirituality. Weiner's “flirtations” with the divine are undertaken in the hopes of finding this elusive “happy ending.” He spends time with whirling dervishes in Turkey, Buddhist monks in India, Franciscans in the Bronx, and many more, all in the hopes of outrunning his despair and apathy, unlocking the “key” to a fulfilled existence, a happy ending. The assumption throughout is that the answer to the riddle *is* out there—that happy endings are at least *available*, if not obligatory.

Weiner's is hardly a unique pursuit, nor are the desires and assumptions that animate it. The pursuit of happy endings—from the mundane and the everyday to the eschatological and existential—has animated human thinking and acting and believing and behaving across cultures and throughout history. Of course, the presence of a widely held human desire/assumption about the world does not thereby mean that said desire/assumption is *true*. Desire is not an argument for the existence of God or of happy endings. But

desire is, at the very least, suggestive. It is worth paying attention to.

So, if we can't say we *deserve* happy endings, what *can* we say? What, if anything, does this desire and the unspoken assumptions behind it point to? Well, from a Christian perspective, I think a good place to start is with grace. Salvation is described throughout Scripture not as something we are owed by virtue of existence, but as a gift of God. Perhaps there is something worth pausing over here. The word "deserve" comes from the language of entitlement. It is transactional language, the language of commerce and business, the language of rights and duties. Words like "gift" and "grace," on the other hand, have a different grammar. They somehow seem more personal, more pregnant with possibility, surprise, and joy, more *human*. They point, I think, to something that is better than we can imagine.

And maybe this is as it should be when we're talking about happy endings. Because, at least for me, the happiest temporal endings I have experienced have not been the collection of debts owed but the flabbergasted acceptance of a sheer, undeserved, unexpected, and delightful gifts.

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