



# Slumdog Millionaire Destiny and Hope

**S**ometimes golden opportunities get missed. Seeing *Slumdog Millionaire* at the movies was one of those. I had free tickets to see this movie at a pre-screening in Portland in December when it was an unknown, almost “straight-to-DVD” movie. Then the blizzard of 2008 descended on the Pacific Northwest and I missed the opportunity. Thereafter, the awards juggernaut took off and *Slumdog* started collecting trophies like a squirrel collects nuts in the fall. Sweep, baby! In fact, this is the first film since Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* in 1993 to collect the top three trophies, Best Picture, Best Director and Best Screenplay, at the top three awards ceremonies: the Golden Globes, the BAFTAs (British Oscars), and the Oscars.

So why did it win all of these awards? Answer: a) The Academy won’t give Best Picture to a comic book film (*The Dark Knight*, which should have been up for this award); b) *Benjamin Button* was too long and too curious; c) too many Best Picture Oscars have gone to Holocaust movies already, and do we really need one more; or d) it was an engaging story with a likeable protagonist that left us with hope. Final answer: all of the above.

The story follows Jamal Malik (Dev Patel) an 18 year-old orphan from Mumbai who is one question away from winning 20 million rupees on the Indian version of “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire.” But Regis-wannabe host Prem Kumar (Anil Kapoor) suspects him of cheating and he is arrested and subjected to police torture. As the Inspector (Irrfan Khan) says, “What can a slumdog possibly know?” Here is the crux of the movie. How can an uneducated kid from the slums possibly do better than the lawyers and doctors who compete, but never get this fa?. A touch of judgmentalism? For sure. A hint of jealousy? Perhaps. *Slumdog Millionaire* unpacks the answers to a) how he can answer the questions correctly and b) why he

wants to do so.

*Slumdog* is told in episodic fashion, starting when Jamal was a little kid in the slums playing cricket with his older brother Salim on the runways of the local airport. In and out of trouble, these brothers are like Athos and Porthos, two of the three musketeers. But Jamal is the tender-hearted of the pair, while Salim is tough and street-wise, always looking for quick cash. When they are orphaned they must make it on their own with no home, no money and no friends.

Another orphan, Latika, comes along and completes the trio. Latika and Jamal become fast friends, destined for more. But life is hard without parents. Moving to the city’s huge trash piles, these three eke out a stinky and stingy living until a “savior” comes to rescue them. But this is no true savior; this is a gangster who wants to exploit these kids as beggars for his own ends. It is here in the orphanage that Salim learns to use force to survive.

Escaping, Salim and Jamal have to leave Latika behind when they climb aboard a train going anywhere but where they are. Thus begins their life of petty crime. Stealing, lying,

cheating to get food, they grow up alone. But Jamal cannot forget Latika. He is smitten and he believes “it is written” that they will wind up together. Through circumstances they come to a place where Salim makes a fateful choice. And Salim and Jamal depart on two different roads.

Salim takes the path downwards becoming a gangster like those he escaped from. For him, the power of the gun makes him a man. But this path will eventually lead to death and destruction. Biblically, such a life spirals down to the pit (Psalm 55:23). In contrast, Jamal is driven by the power of love, of hope. He chooses a path of humility and honesty. Working as a “char-wallah,” a tea-boy serving the Indians working at a call center, he speaks the truth and earns an honest wage. Such a way leads to the true path, the narrow way of Jesus, the way of life (Matt. 7:13-14). There is a contrast of brotherly characters and brotherly destinies.

Boyle has done a fine job of making a film of the slums of India that is both gut-wrenching and grittily realistic while still inspiring hope. Contrasting the squalor and hopelessness of the ghettos and trash heaps with the bright, almost vibrant, colors of the Indian clothes and fabrics, Boyle highlights the humanity present even in such deplorable conditions.

Slumdog Millionaire is tough to watch in places. It is a lot like City of God, the 2002 film portraying the Brazilian slums and the gangs that owned that hell-on-earth. Where City of God was overly vicious, Slumdog is more restrained, though portraying the violence of religious intolerance between the Hindus and the Muslims. There is imagery of people being brutally beaten and burned alive, the cruel mutilation and exploitation of innocent orphans, and the torture of Jamal to seek a confession. Yet these are not gratuitous; they add to the story and help to communicate the reasons for the choices the two



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brothers make. They show the poverty and its implications of life in this rarely seen part of the world.

At one point the police inspector tells Jamal, "Money and women; the reasons for most mistakes in life. Looks like you've mixed up both." But Jamal's cool and nerveless manner in the hot-seat under the TV lights is because he is not motivated by money. For many, the allure of winning the millions on this show is an escape from a confining and constraining way of life. In contrast, Jamal is merely driven by hope, the hope of finding his life-long love, Latika.

Danny Boyle has used hope and money as two themes in several of his movies. In his debut film, *Shallow Grave*, it was the criminal's hope of keeping the cash and finding a new life. But that hope was shallow and degenerated with the disintegrating relationships. Millions saw hope come to the working-class boy who found the money. But in *Slumdog* the hope is not for money; rather, it is for love. The money is simply a vehicle to get to the girl. Love trumps loot.

Indeed, hope is a native emotion, a primal urge, a guttural drive. Without hope, the strongest die. With hope, even the weak can survive. Hope is an anchor for the soul (Heb. 6:19). It keeps an orphaned Indian going when he is being tortured. Hope keeps us coming back to a dead-end job. Hope for the future enables us to see beyond the daily grind to a future with our Lord in heaven, (Phil. 3:20) a future that awaits all who follow Jesus.

Ultimately, Jamal, a Muslim, believed in destiny. He believes "it's written," namely that he and Latika (Freida Pinto) would be together forever. Destiny, the irresistible course of events, is his dream. But *Slumdog* never explores what or who is behind this destiny. Why is "it" written and who wrote "it" in the first place? As a follower of Jesus, the who is God, and the why, destiny, is his will. Destiny can be seen as simply another term for the sovereign will of God (Rom. 8:28). God is in con-

trol of all events, some of which he has foretold in the prophets. The rest cannot be known ahead of time apart from his special revelation.

*Slumdog Millionaire*, for all the hope it inspires, left me thinking about this idea of "it's written." This is a phrase that occurs at least 70 times in the Bible. In each case it is referring to the written revelation of God. He has revealed himself through the Bible. These revelations are the truth. Where there are prophecies they have been fulfilled or they will be in due time. As Jamal had faith in the idea of his destiny being written, we can have faith in the sovereign God and his written word. And with that faith, we can have hope.

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