



DISCUSSION GUIDE

# The Shawshank Redemption

*"Fear can hold you prisoner. Hope can set you free."*

*The Shawshank Redemption* was nominated for seven Academy Awards and has become one of the best-selling videos of all time. *Shawshank* is an emotional and cathartic exploration of the best and the worst of the human spirit. Its message of hope and perseverance in adversity captivates and inspires while teaching important moral truths.

This discussion guide will help you discuss the movie from a biblical perspective as you reflect on the themes of hope, endurance, freedom, and peace.

**Based on:**

*The Shawshank Redemption* (Columbia Pictures, 1994), written and directed by Frank Darabont. Adapted from the Stephen King novella, "Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption," first published in *Different Seasons* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1982). This film is MPAA-rated R for language and prison violence.



I N T E R N A T I O N A L

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## Movie Summary

The film begins in 1946. Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins) is a successful banker whose life changes drastically when he is wrongly convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of his wife and her lover.

Andy is sent to Shawshank Prison. At first he keeps to himself, but before long he befriends Ellis Boyd Redding (Morgan Freeman), known as “Red.” Red is puzzled and intrigued by the enigmatic Andy. Even while Andy is enduring the sexual abuse of other violent prisoners, he seems to have a peace none of the others know or understand.

Andy displays extraordinary character in the midst of the dismal prison conditions. He becomes an in-house financial planner and tax consultant to the prison guards. He perseveres in unlocking state funds to stock a prison library. Through his efforts, fellow prisoners learn to read, enjoy good music, pass high-school equivalency exams, and find a kind of freedom inside the prison walls.

After nearly 20 years inside the prison, Andy makes his final bid for freedom. Unbeknownst to everyone else, Andy has been chipping away the walls of his prison cell all these years with a six-inch rock hammer. He finally breaks through to the other side and escapes, dramatically exposing the prison’s corruption to the outside world in the process. He crosses the border and lives peacefully by the ocean, in “the place with no memory.”

—For more coverage of The Shawshank Redemption, visit [http://ChristianityToday.com/go/"Shawshank+Redemption"](http://ChristianityToday.com/go/)

### Rated R

*The Shawshank Redemption* is rated R for language and prison violence.

## Discussing the Scenes

Select one or more of these themes to discuss:

1. Hope
2. Endurance
3. Freedom
4. Inner Peace

### 1. Hope: “A good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies.”

**(Romans 15:1–4, 13; 1 Corinthians 15:51–58; Philippians 3:12–21; 1 John 4:13–18; Revelation 21:1–4)**

*The Shawshank Redemption* is about hope in a hopeless place. Three scenes in the movie explicitly focus on hope, revealing the film’s moral structure.

The first scene comes after Andy endures two weeks of solitary confinement for locking himself in the warden’s office and playing Mozart over the prison loudspeakers. Andy explains to Red that music fuels hope: “You need it so we don’t forget ... that there are places in the world that aren’t made out of stone, that there’s something inside that they



can't get to, that they can't touch—it's yours." Red rejects this emphatically, saying, "Hope! Let me tell you something, my friend. Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane. It's got no use on the inside." Even when Andy gives Red a harmonica, Red can't bring himself to play it, because he fears hope.

The next scene comes after Andy's escape and Red's parole. Red reads a letter from Andy, which says: "Remember, Red. Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies. I will be hoping that this letter finds you, and finds you well."

And, finally, the last scene dealing with hope is the end of the story, and the last words of Red's narration: "I find I am so excited I can barely sit still or hold a thought in my head. I think it is the excitement only a free man can feel, a free man at the start of a long journey whose conclusion is uncertain. ... I hope I can make it across the border. I hope to see my friend and shake his hand. I hope the Pacific is as blue as it has been in my dreams. I hope."

**[Q]** What does a life without hope do to a person? Red survived 40 years of incarceration. How did Red change from the first time we see his parole rejection (at 20 years) to the last time (at 40 years)?

**[Q]** Even after Red is released, he still has little or no hope. Why? If freedom from physical bondage doesn't bring hope, how are freedom and hope related?

**[Q]** When Brooks Hatlen (James Whitmore) is released on parole, the best he can do is hope that Jake, the bird he rescued in prison, is "doing okay and making new friends." His letter reveals what burdens his heart: "I don't like it here. I'm tired of being afraid all the time." How does fear quench hope?

**[Q]** If fear is the opposite of hope, then what do you make of 1 John 4:18? How does perfect love drive out fear? How does perfect love invite hope?

**[Q]** Read Romans 15:1–4. This passage says that the Scriptures were given to us so that we might have hope. How do the Scriptures give us hope?

**[Q]** Romans 15:13 tells us that the Holy Spirit makes us overflow with hope. How does this work? How does Paul say that hope enters our lives?

**[Q]** In the film, Andy talks longingly of living in a village by the Pacific Ocean, "a place of no memory." How does this serve as a metaphor for heaven? In what way can heaven be described as a place of no memory? What will be forgotten in this place we hope for? What should we learn to forget about now so we can enjoy hope (see Rev. 21:1–4; Phil. 3:12–21)?

## 2. Endurance: "It would take a man 600 years to tunnel through the wall ... old Andy did it in less than 20." (1 Corinthians 9:24–27; Hebrews 12:1–13; Philippians 3:7–14)

Prison drains endurance. When Brooks Hatlen was paroled he lacked the courage even to stay alive while free. In one sense, Hatlen endured prison—as a mere survivor—but in another sense his spirit was long broken and dead.



But through nearly 20 years of hardship, Andy doesn't wither, falter, or merely survive. Repeatedly, prison tests Andy's endurance: banished to "the hole," battered by the sadistic "Sisters," and used by a corrupt warden to launder dirty money, Andy keeps his spirit alive and gives of himself to his fellow prisoners. Further, we discover that Andy spent years patiently tunneling through solid-rock walls with a six-inch hammer.

- [Q] What do you think gave Andy the power to endure?
- [Q] Paul the Apostle compared life to a footrace, which requires persistent training to build the endurance required to win (see 1 Cor. 9:24–27). How would you apply Paul's analogy of a race for eternal reward to Andy's experience in prison?
- [Q] How does having a long-term, big-picture vision relate to having endurance? What was Andy's ultimate, long-term goal, and how did that impact his ability to endure?
- [Q] Andy suffered greatly while being unfairly imprisoned. How did his suffering change him from the man he was before? How does our suffering change us? How should we view difficult times in our lives (see Heb. 12:1–13)?
- [Q] Andy used a tiny hammer to dig through stone prison walls. What issues in your life require that kind of long-term effort?
- [Q] Why do you think salvation doesn't automatically transport you beyond all the walls in your life? Why is there still so much work to do after coming to know and trust in God (see Phil. 3:7–14, especially vv. 12–14)?

### **3. Freedom: "Some birds aren't meant to be caged." (John 8:31–47; Romans 5:8; 6:15–23)**

When Red reflects on Andy's absence, he believes that Andy simply didn't belong in a prison—not just because of Andy's innocence, but because Andy was, by nature, a person created for freedom. In a sense, that is true of all of us, Red and Andy included. We were not created for sin and bondage, but for loving fellowship with God.

But in another sense, none of us are innocent of wrongdoing—again, Andy and Red included. Near the end of the movie, Andy recognizes that he is guilty, not because he pulled the trigger on the gun that killed his wife, but because he drove her away by not loving her, by being cold, and being hard to know.

- [Q] While discussing the Christian themes in this movie, it's important to remember that the movie is not an allegory that can be compared to the gospel on a point-by-point basis. Andy escapes bondage by relying on his own two hands. God is not portrayed as the grantor of freedom in this film. However, the prison and bondage imagery are useful metaphors for sin and the bondage it creates. How is freedom for the believer not like the freedom gained in this movie?
- [Q] The word "redemption" implies freedom bought with a price. What is the price Andy and Red pay to obtain their freedom? What price has been paid for our freedom and redemption (Rom. 5:8)?



- [Q] Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31–32). What kind of freedom is Jesus talking about? How does truth set a person free?
- [Q] Paul talks about becoming slaves to God instead of sin, and he makes it clear that slavery to God is true freedom (see Rom. 6:15–23). How does becoming a slave to God and righteousness equal freedom?
- [Q] As Andy emerges from the sewer outside Shawshank, he exultantly lifts his hands up in joy. Later, as Red reflects on Andy’s note, Red begins to feel joy: “I find I am so excited I can barely sit still or hold a thought in my head. I think it is the excitement only a free man can feel.” What should be our natural response to being set free from the bondage of sin and death? How do we nurture this joy so it stays alive after years of faith and service?

#### **4. Inner Peace: “An invisible coat that would shield him from this place.” (Philippians 4:4–9; Romans 12:1–8, 18)**

Early in the film, Red reflects on something that sets Andy apart from the other inmates: “I could see why some of the boys took him for snobby. He had a quiet way about him, a walk and a talk that just wasn’t normal around here. He strolled, like a man in a park without a care or a worry in the world, like he had on an invisible coat that would shield him from this place.”

- [Q] What do you think made Andy so peaceful?
- [Q] How was Andy’s mental life different from the other inmates? What kinds of lifestyle habits did he exhibit that contributed to his mental outlook?
- [Q] When Andy received his first shipment of books and vinyl records for his library, he spontaneously locked himself in the warden’s office and played a selection from Mozart. He relaxed with a peaceful look on his face, reveling in the beauty of the opera. How does beauty cultivate inner peace? When have you experienced something beautiful and felt peace?
- [Q] Paul the Apostle gives us a formula for inner peace in Philippians 4:4–9. Why do you think it’s so hard for us to follow these guidelines? Why is it easier to worry than to live in faith and enjoy the peace of God?
- [Q] What does Paul say in Romans 12 about our mental outlook? What are the characteristics of a person conformed to the world compared to a person whose mind has been transformed?
- [Q] Why does the mind and the focus of our thoughts play such an important role in shaping who we are and how we behave? Why doesn’t salvation and redemption automatically change all the ways we think and feel?



- [Q] What disciplines can you begin putting into place that can take you toward a life of peace and spiritual transformation?

## As the Credits Roll

- [Q] Near the end of the movie, Andy tells Red, “I guess it comes down to a simple choice, really: get busy living, or get busy dying.” What do you think about that sentiment? How are believers sometimes distracted from truly living?
- [Q] After Andy escapes, he pilfers the warden’s stash of laundered money before heading south to live in paradise. Red refers to Andy’s theft of more than \$370,000 as “severance pay for 19 years.” Do you think Andy was justified in stealing this money?
- [Q] What other messages from *The Shawshank Redemption* challenged or encouraged your faith? Did anything else help you see truth in a new way?

—Study by Rich Tatum, who lives in Romeoville, Illinois.