

THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE

A Faith-Based Look At An Ancient Idea



"I know the manifold deceits of that monstrous lady, Fortune;"
Boethius

Don Metzник

Introduction

The Wheel of Fortune: What Is It And Why Is It Important Today?

Life is not a gameshow like The Wheel of Fortune. It is serious stuff. Knowing what the Wheel of Fortune truly is, how it affects your view of life, and, ultimately, who is at its core may be one of the most important considerations of your life.



A Brief History

There are several distinct periods in the development of the idea and role of The Wheel of Fortune.

Fate—Greek and Roman Style

It was unnerving for the ancients to believe that unseen powers could dictate the fortunes of their lives. To deal with this discomfort and gain some semblance of control, the Greeks and Romans introduced gods and goddesses who dealt out the cards of life. They became the Fates, controlling a person's life from birth to death.

Boethius (480-524 AD) and His Fate

The Roman goddess of fortune, Fortuna, overshadowed the Greek goddess Tyche and became the most popular goddess in the medieval period.

We learn about Fortuna from the book, *The Consolation of Philosophy* by the Roman philosopher Boethius who is well suited to write about the fickleness of fate. While at the height of society, he was imprisoned on false charges and ultimately executed. While imprisoned, in his "discussion" with Lady Philosophy (Fortuna), Boethius resigns himself to the notion that she is fickle and untrustworthy. From this emerged the image of a wheel of fortune.



Fortuna depicted in a manuscript.

Fortuna in the Medieval World (450-1500 AD)

The Wheel was made tangible in the 12th century, typically with the image of Fortuna who was often pictured blindfolded and standing by a wheel with a mechanical lever she controlled. The wheel often pictured kings and rulers. At the top of the wheel they were pictured with wealth, position, and success. Note that there was nowhere to go but down. Next, to the right of the

wheel, down they went, losing what they once had. On the bottom of the wheel they were shown crushed and powerless. Then, to the left and climbing up the wheel, they were shown trying to reclaim lost wealth, position, and success.

Clearly, Fortuna was a monstrous lady. Was there an alternative?

I know the manifold deceits of that monstrous lady, Fortune; in particular, her fawning friendship with those whom she intends to cheat, until the moment when she unexpectedly abandons them, and leaves them reeling in agony beyond endurance.

Boethius, *Consolatio Philosophiae*



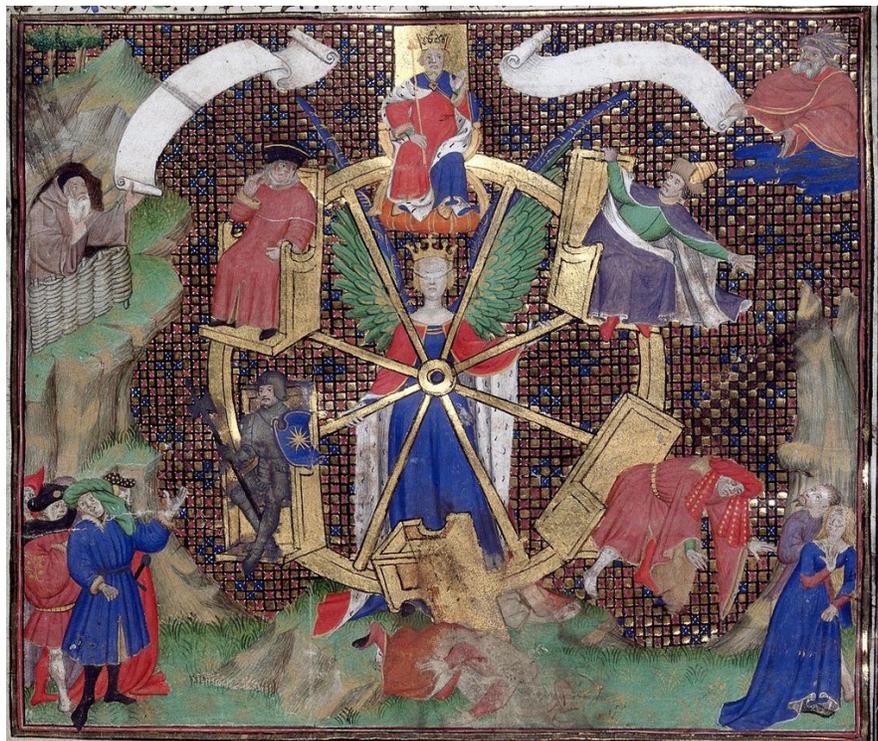
12th Century manuscript showing Fortuna adjusting the fate of kings.

It was during this medieval period that the pagan notion of Fortuna became Christianized. The Wheel was often symbolically depicted in the stained glass windows of cathedrals, reminding everyone of the vanity of pursuing personal ambition at the expense of higher values. But there was a difference. The center of the wheel had changed.

Our Wheel Of Fortune

The metaphor of life as a wheel is certainly appropriate. We have our modern day “kings” in the form of business leaders, politicians, celebrities, and athletes, and we daily note their rise and fall. On a more personal level, we experience the wheel operating in our own lives and the lives of those around us; we get the job we want then learn about a cancer diagnosis. We enjoy a family holiday, then a family member is injured driving home. Someone wins the lottery and becomes a drug addict. We cycle through many events daily: some good, some bad, and many capricious.

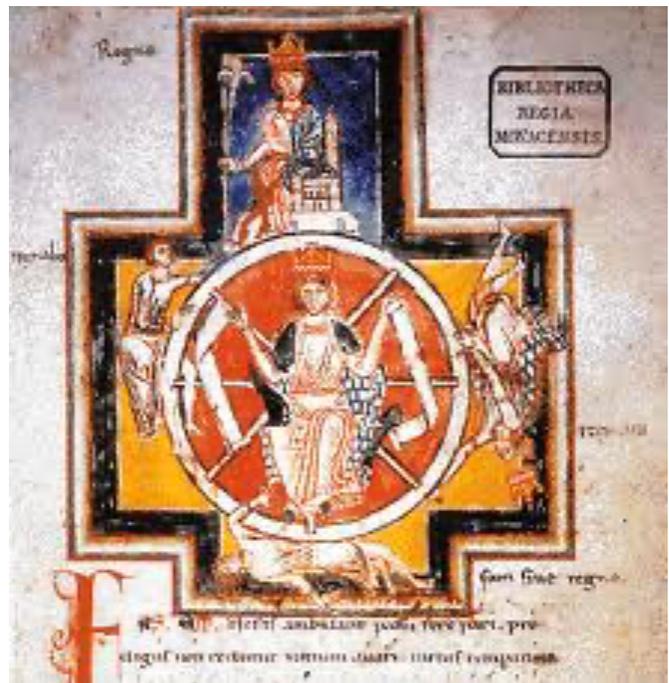
The key issue is not the wheel of life’s experiences per se, however, but what is at its core. Is the core merely an axle around which the wheel spins? Or is there something or someone at the center, to which the spokes of life are attached, and around which we may make sense of life with its misfortunes and windfalls?



Modern Times and The Wheel of Fortune

The key to this question is not the wheel-with its obsession with money, success, praise and the accompanying fear of loss- but on the center around which it revolves. Selecting our center is the key. For Christians, this center is Christ.

If we choose Christ, we will find peace regardless of where we are on the wheel. Our wheel turns constantly, and we are not at the controls. And so, it is vital that we focus on and depend upon a never-changing presence that has love at its core. This is how we find peace and purpose in a world that seems to be spinning out of control



Moving Forward

Since ancient times, we have been wrestling with the fickleness of life, attempting to come to grips with its uncertainty, and, as we have discovered, failing to explain and control the uncontrollable. We, like mice, tread The Wheel of Fortune and go nowhere. Unless... unless we see not the wheel but the center that holds the wheel together and around which we may discover meaning, purpose, comfort, and peace. It is not so much that life tosses us onto the wheel but that we grasp onto it, in the mistaking belief that it will bring us somewhere.

Replace the wheel of fortune with the wheel of faith. Do not jump haphazardly onto the man-made wheel. Rather, allow the strength of Christ's loving grip firmly attach us to Him.



Rose Window Sienna Cathedral

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