

Christmas at the Movies

It's a Wonderful Life

It's a Wonderful Life, starring Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed, has become a perennial classic of Christmas movies. It was released in 1946. The story opens with prayers for George Bailey being heard in heaven. Clarence, an angel who has been working for 200 years to earn his wings, is summoned to go to earth to help George. Clarence is then shown the reason why help is needed.

As a young boy, George saves his little brother, Harry, from drowning. As a teenager, he works for Mr. Gower, the druggist, who, in the despair of news of his son's death, makes a mistake in filling an order by putting a poisonous substance into pills. George sees what he has done and keeps it from going to the home of a sick child.

George is always dreaming of great adventure, of traveling the world. He wants to do something great and important. He works for his father at the family business, the Bailey Building & Loan, for four years, saving money for college.

On the night before he leaves on a trip to Europe and then off to college, his father suffers a stroke and dies. Rather than letting the business be dissolved at the insistence of the villain in the movie, Mr. Potter, George foregoes college, giving his college money to his brother Harry.

Life closes in on George. He hopes that when Harry finishes college, he will come home to work at the business so that he (George) can be free to leave Bedford Falls.

Harry returns home, but with a wife and a job offer to work for his father-in-law in the family business in Buffalo.

George stays in town at the Building & Loan, giving up on his dreams. He marries his sweetheart, Mary, but as they drive away from the wedding, heading out on their honeymoon, he sees a run on the Building & Loan. George dishes out his own savings, his honeymoon money, to the depositors in order to keep the bank afloat.

He settles into the job of running the Bailey Building & Loan, fighting off Mr. Potter's continual efforts to take over the institution. At one point, Potter tells George that he is "trapped and frittering his life away."

Then one day before Christmas, a day when the bank examiner is there to look at the books, Uncle Billy mislays an \$8,000 bank deposit. The money falls into the hands of Mr. Potter who realizes it is now his best chance to bring about the end of the Building & Loan.

The situation looks bleak. Facing bankruptcy and scandal, George's life goes into a meltdown. He ends up on the bridge into town, getting ready to jump into the river and end his life. This is when Clarence shows up. To save George, he jumps into the river so that George will jump in to save him.

Clarence, then, begins to show George just what the world would be like without him, what would have happened if he had never been born. Everything about Bedford Falls is different. The town is named Pottersville. It is a hotbed for bars, gambling and dance joints.

George learns that Mr. Gower, the druggist, spent 20 years in prison for poisoning a child; the Bailey Building & Loan went out of business years before; his house is a rundown, dilapidated shack; and Uncle Billy has been in an insane asylum ever since losing the business. Mary is a librarian – never married.

At one point during this time of discovery, Clarence says to George: “Strange thing – each man's life touches so many others' lives. When he isn't around, he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?”

This begs the whole question about purpose – purpose in living. In one of Charles Schlotz's *Peanuts* comic strips, Charlie Brown is laying in bed with Snoopy perched on his stomach. Charlie says, “Sometimes I lie awake at night, and I ask, ‘What is the meaning of life’”

In the next panel we see Charlie saying, “Then a voice comes to me that says, ‘I before E except after C!’”

George thinks he has wasted his whole life. He feels that his life has been a failure; maybe it would have been better if he had never lived at all.

Is life merely a matter of fate – some unknown, uncontrollable force which acts upon us? Or is life simply what we define it to be? The Roman senator Appian Claudius in the fourth century B.C. wrote: “Every man is the architect of his own fortune.”

Perhaps you feel a little like George: does it really matter that you were born? Is there really a purpose for your life?

The answer to both of those questions is an emphatic “Yes!” Yes, it does matter; and yes, there is a purpose to life. We are not left here with no clue as to purpose, even though there are those who would deny that. The renowned atheist and philosopher Bertrand Russell once wrote:

What else is there to make life tolerable? We stand on the shore of an ocean, crying to the night and to emptiness. Sometimes a voice of one drowning, and in a moment the silence returns. The world seems to me quite dreadful, the unhappiness of many people is very great, and I often wonder how they endure it. It is usually the central thing around which their lives are built, and I suppose if they did not live most of their lives in the things of the moment, they would not be able to go on.

If we were just a product of pure chance, there might be truth to that statement. However, the Bible clearly refutes this concept of meaninglessness. It declares that you and I have been created by a personal God – one who knows everything about us. The Hebrew King David wrote in Psalm 139:

O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways.... For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well.... Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them.
– *Psalm 139:1-3, 13-14, 16*

You were created to have a relationship with the eternal Creator. Meaning comes from him, because of him and his intentions for your life. Rick Warren, author of the best-selling book *The Purpose Driven Life* says that if we are to understand the purpose of life we must begin with God. He writes:

You exist only because God wills that you exist. You were made by God and for God – and until you understand that, life will never make sense. It is only in God that we discover our origin, our identity, our meaning, our purpose, our significance, and our destiny. Every other path leads to a dead end.

Christmas is all about God reaching out to us to make possible a relationship with him. Because we are sinners, the Bible says that we are separated from God and

cannot have a relationship with him until that issue is dealt with. God stepped out of eternity into time in the person of Jesus – born of lowly stature in a Bethlehem stable – one who later was put to death, bearing your sins and mine. God judged our sins at that Cross. Because the justice of God was satisfied at the cross, you and I can be forgiven of our sins and restored to a relationship of purpose with God.

When we know God personally, then we can begin to discover the purpose for our individual lives. Paul Tournier writes:

The main thing in the world is not being sure what God's will is, but seeking it sincerely and following what we do understand of it. The only possible answer to the destiny of man is to seek without respite to fulfill God's purpose.

The Shorter Catechism of 1646 addressed the idea of purpose this way:

The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

God desires that we might know him and might become more like him. That is, that our lives be more and more Christ-like as we grow in our relationship with him, as we get to know him better each day. This is one way in which we bring glory to him.

There has never been a person like Jesus Christ. Followers and critics alike attest to that fact. God's purpose for our lives is that we might be daily transformed more and more into his likeness. This all has to do with character.

But character is displayed in conduct. The way we conduct our lives reveals what is on the inside. If we are becoming more Christ-like, we will act more Christ-like. And we will discover that our lives will touch others for good.

In the movie *You've Got Mail*, Meg Ryan emails Tom Hanks with this statement: "I've had a very small life." That is probably how George Bailey felt. Maybe that is how you feel. "My life really doesn't matter much."

But who knows the impact you have had and will have in others' lives: a kind word, a gracious deed, a life of godly character lived before others. You just don't know. But people's lives will be different because their lives intersected with yours.

How do we find our life's meaning before we get to the point where George was?
Let me suggest three simple things:

1) **Evaluate.** Take stock of your situation – an honest assessment of your life. We don't need to deny reality, the things that really are.

Part of that evaluation is dealing with unrealized dreams and unfulfilled expectations. There might be a grieving process of not accomplishing all we had hoped to do and all we had hoped to be.

Another part is to really see all the blessings we do have. George so lost perspective he missed seeing the blessings of a loving spouse, beautiful children, wonderful friends.

Don't miss this Christmas seeing all that you do have and all that your life has meant to others.

Watch out for the dreaded disease of *comparisonitis*. You know, you read the Christmas letters you get from friends and being lamenting: "Why couldn't I have had a year like they did? Look at their picture; everyone is perfect!"

Here's the problem: you are comparing the known (your reality) with the unknown (what you see in their letter, their picture which might be fantasy). You don't know what their whole year was like.

Evaluate, then...

2) **Discover.** Discover God's purposes for your life. The Apostle Paul writes that it is by grace – God's favor – that we have been saved, brought into a relationship with him. Then he says that we are God's workmanship, his masterpiece, "created in Christ Jesus for good works that God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."

Discover those good works God has for you; they are part of your life's purpose.

In our culture today, people are so fixated on success. But as people get older, what I think they really desire is significance – the fact that their life really matters. How do we find significance? This is a question Moses wrestled with almost thirty-five hundred years ago. His thoughts made their way into the Hebrew songbook in Psalm 90. Here's a little of what he said:

The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.... So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.... Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days... Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands!

– *Psalm 90:10, 12, 14, 17*

God will define and establish the meaning of our lives in the final word. In the end it is God's commendation that will matter the most. One day, he will sit in judgment on the way in which we have lived our lives.

In the meantime, God desires to affect the lives of others through us. Oftentimes we don't realize the impact we do have. What we do in this lifetime really does matter. Evaluate; Discover; then...

3) **Surrender.** Embrace with thanksgiving the life God has given you. That means learning contentment – choosing to live joyously with the circumstances in which you find yourself: young or old, single or married, with children or without, financially well-off or not.

Find your joy and significance in those things far more important than temporal things – things like ultimate meaning, purpose, and fulfillment found in being God's child.

From time to time we get a glimpse of the effect our life has had on others. In our movie, that's what happened to George. He was allowed to see that his life did matter. George finds himself back at the bridge, praying to get back to his life, praying that he might live again. And then George discovers he is back to reality. This is how the movie ends.

It's a Wonderful Life is a fictional story, of course. But in George we see the desperation that often fills the hearts of people today, a quiet desperation born out of a lack of purpose, of meaning, the sense that there is something that is greater than oneself.

This is what God invites each of us to – a life of purpose, a life that has meaning in the ultimate sense. Here, then, is our destiny, the ultimate purpose in life: that we might have salvation by the grace of God and might live a life of purpose, doing those good works that God has ordained for us. In doing so, our lives will make a difference; they will really matter.