

January at the Movies, 1  
The Descendants

**\*\* Isaiah 44: 1 -7**

“But now listen, Jacob, my servant, Israel, whom I have chosen. This is what the Lord says - He who made you, who formed you in the womb, and who will help you: Do not be afraid, Jacob, my servant, Jeshurun, whom I have chosen. For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants. They will spring up like grass in a meadow, like poplar trees by flowing streams. Some will say, ‘I belong to the Lord’; others will call themselves by the name of Jacob; still others will write on their hand, ‘The Lord’s,’ and will take the name Israel.

**\*\* 2 Timothy 1: 3 – 5**

I thank God, whom I serve, as my ancestors did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers. Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.

[\*\* intro clip]

I was thinking that it might be a good idea as we begin here today, to restate – or to explain for the first time for those who’ve never heard this before – the concept behind our “January at the Movies” sermon series. This is the fourth time we’ve done this series, and it is well received/ tolerated/ and despised by all. Pretty much an a-typical response! I realize that not everyone here is a film buff, and I especially get that *everybody* has different tastes in movies! (If you like them at all.)

So, one thing that I will say, and will *need* to say every week this January is that first of all, I don’t pick the January movies as a way of offering you two hours a week of entertainment value! These aren’t the church equivalent of “Oprah’s book picks” – in that I’m not suggesting that you’re going to *like* all the films that we’ll talk about. This series has never been about ‘entertainment’ *per se*. Although, I think that most of these films have been at least somewhat entertaining.

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The idea is that we are looking at these films as a way of listening to what our culture has to say about some issues, subjects that are important to us as Christians... Issues that are discussed in Scripture, or have spiritual implications. So, right there, that eliminates a lot of films from our list of possibilities. I don't pick "Christian" films, for one thing – like "Fireproof", and "Soul Surfer", or even the "Lord of the Rings." Not saying that they're not worth seeing, but they have very little to tell us about our culture – they're more the faith community talking (and, hopefully they're speaking *to* our culture, but that's a lot harder to do.)

That criteria also eliminates most 'action' films and comedies, because their 'point' typically, is simply entertainment... and you'd have to search pretty hard to find spiritual content in "The Hangover" and such. So, they're out.

Neither is part of my picking process that I agree with what a film is saying about these issues; especially if the point is made powerfully. In fact, I would expect that it shouldn't be surprising that a film is suggesting something different than we would consider 'truth'. But, for the most part, whether intentionally or unintentionally, in most of our films in the past three years we've found often *powerful* illustrations of truth, and goodness.

Either way, my intention is always to respect the culture, and the art of the filmmakers, so we can disagree with something in a film, but I will not trash it. (At least, not publically!)

So, we've looked at issues like racism in Gran Torino, Invictus, and The Help; we've talked about the importance of Scripture in the Book of Eli, we've seen allusions to the Incarnation in Avatar, discussed greed in Wall Street 2, and lots more. And here we go again...

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I have four more films waiting for this month, and it's a very eclectic list. Three are recent (in fact, one hasn't been released on DVD yet – I'm crossing my fingers that it will come out on Jan 15 as promised!) One is over 10 years old – but when I found it as #1 in a list of the 100 Most Spiritually Significant Films, I bought a copy and queued it up for 2013. [BTW, just a reminder that I had that title wrong in our insert – next week's film is 13 Conversations About One Thing].

A little more, as introduction, and we'll get down to business...

Because I'm not picking 'Christian' films, we just can't expect the content of all of them to be as wholesome as we might like. Now, I just won't pick films that are simply offensive to me – I think we really do need to be careful of what we put into our minds and hearts, and ears. But, on the other hand, in depicting real life, there is likely going to be some content that is more suitable for mature audiences. Some of the Language (in the first two of this month's films) is a bit rough, occasionally some violence (which I am very sensitive to). But this is a sliding scale, and you know your tolerance level, and I'm not going to judge that. You don't have to watch them.

So let me say it again – watching these films is intended more as a spiritual assignment than a 'family movie night'. So watch critically; reflect on what you're seeing – don't just say "I hated that film", or "that was *great*", but think about *why* you are reacting to these films as you are.

What is the emotion that it's touching? *Why* did that movie, that scene, make you angry, or confused, or afraid... or, *whatever*? How might someone *else* view it?

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You don't need to see the films to participate in this series (it's kind of like when we do Series' on Books, I'll give you enough information, and some clips, for you to be able to follow along each week. But, seeing them will add to the experience, in that we would be better equipped to dialogue. It's up to you.

I frequently get responses from people via email about the films, your impressions, and thoughts. I really like that! Sometimes you agree with what I say, sometimes you don't – but my intention isn't to tell you what you should be getting out of a film, it's to open a conversation. To help us become 'practical theologians', so instead of merely reacting to things, we can intelligently discuss what we believe and why – and apply it to real life.

So, take someone out for a coffee this January, and if you lack any conversation starters, try this – “I think Pastor Steve completely missed the point of that last film!” And there you go....

So, I'll start by telling you my emotional response to this week's film: the Oscar Winner for Writing (best Adapted Screenplay), also a Nominee for Best Picture, Directing, Actor in a leading role, and Film Editing. The film is [The Descendants](#), starring George Clooney.

My reaction? I thought this was a profoundly *sad* movie. I don't know if leading off this series with this film was such a great idea... but then, next week's isn't exactly 'roses and sunshine' either. HeyYoung shared with me something that we both experienced as we watched it: 'this is *our* life'! We know these people – every one of them. We've sat in those rooms, had those conversations. (Which is probably part of why it hit me as hard as it did.)

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The rather conservative Christianity Today magazine gave this film four stars in a review that begins with these words:

*The Descendants is a grown-up movie about grown-up problems, and that alone makes it rather old-fashioned. When's the last time you saw a studio picture that didn't seem to care one bit about the coveted teenage demographic? Here we have a movie about a man struggling with the stuff of life and death—terminal illness, a tumultuous marriage, and infidelity. Major business decisions, parenting problems, a family in turmoil. Showing grace and forgiveness to the people who have wronged him the most. This is grown-up stuff, all right, and the movie doesn't take it lightly.<sup>1</sup>*

Clooney plays Matt King, a successful Hawaiian lawyer who's facing a tough case—namely, the proposed sale of his family's land, which could result in a major windfall for his bankrupt cousins, but ultimately prove detrimental to the community at large. This is one of the many problems he's facing, but it's the one the movie lingers on the least. His wife Elizabeth is in a coma, from a boating accident, and his daughters—ages 10 and 17—are wildly disrespectful of their dad, their mom, and each other.

Here's a taste of the film, from one of the trailers....

\*\*clip 1

That review from CT continues:

*"Critics are praising The Descendants for being "real." What they mean is that the movie is about characters facing true-to-life problems for which there are no great solutions, and that its main character thinks through his challenges and ultimately handles them like an adult. That's something else I love about it: Every time Matt is confronted with something, we get a shot of him thinking it through, and when he reaches a decision, we can't help but feel like it's the wise one.*

Which is not to say he doesn't struggle with all these things.

\*\* Clip #2

In the beginning of the film we learn a little bit about Matt. He's a successful lawyer, who has a

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/decemberweb-only/descendants.html>

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large trust that he refuses to live on (unlike most of his relatives, who have spent all theirs down to nothing). Matt lives in Hawaii, a virtual paradise, and is the sole trustee of a large parcel of land that he has to decide what to do with. The family expects him to choose to sell it, so that they can become rich...but Matt is not sure if that is a good thing for the people of the island, or the family.

His business, and this inheritance issue take up more and more of his time, focus, and energy... and then things start to fall apart. His wife, Elizabeth has a boating accident, is in a coma, and he learns that she will die – he has to prepare everyone for the time when they will remove life support. But, as you saw in the first clip, he discovers a deep ‘secret’ in his family – one that drove a wedge between his wife and oldest daughter, (and contributed to her alcoholism). Let’s look again at the moment when that ‘secret’ is revealed.

### \*\*Clip 3

Before Matt learns about this infidelity, there is a scene where he sits by his wife’s bedside and not only confesses to her that he hasn’t been a very good husband, but pledges to do better.

### \*\*Clip 4

Family life is never easy. It is full of pitfalls and craziness. Many people today just accept the reality of dysfunction in their homes, and they choose to let the wind rule the day, and blow - wherever. That was the path that Matt King was following at the start of the story - and perhaps it was a path that caused his kids to misbehave, his wife to stray, and his priorities to be out of line with what really mattered. But we find that his promise, “I’m ready to be a better husband, a better father” is going to be difficult (and in some ways, impossible) to keep. But, to his credit, he tries... and he tries hard.

Which is not to say that the film makes Matt out to be a saint. Far from it. He is not a very good parent, and we receive strong suggestions that he has not been a very good husband. But he values goodness and tries to act graciously and reasonably. He shows grace in a way that I’m not

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sure I could. He rarely loses his cool, and when he does, it's understandable.

What I found to be very real in this film is that practically everyone – even Sid – was shown sympathetically. The one character who seemed totally despicable was the weasel who had the affair with Matt's wife... as you meet his family, and experience the devastation and pain that this affair had on two families... it would be easy to finger him as 'the cause' of this whole mess – especially when it turns up that his motivation for the affair was almost entirely self-centered, and had everything to do with money and lust, and nothing about real love. (Which, from a Biblical standpoint, shouldn't surprise us!)

But I was happy to see a Hollywood film show the heartbreak of an extramarital affair; it seems that so often this is trivialized, at times glamorized ("I deserve better than you!")

That reminds me of a moment at a ministry Conference that our staff went together to a few years ago at the Church of the Resurrection, in Leawood, KS. At one point in one of the evening programs, pastor Adam Hamilton stepped aside, and said, "I'm sorry if I may have seemed distracted this week... but this is very important to me. But I'm dealing with a crisis in my staff."

And then it seemed that he made a spontaneous decision to share this. Two of his staff members were discovered having an affair. Hamilton was clearly broken by this, and I'm sure, the church was, as well – not to mention the extended families of both parties. He told us that these were promising young leaders, in fact, the man was one that 'he thought would be my [i.e., Hamilton's] eventual successor. As the leader of this 25,000+ member church.

I will never forget the haunting question he asked them (and us) that night: "How did they ever think this would end well?"

In our film, it doesn't end well... there was incredible amounts of pain and hurt; although there are signs of hope, that the remnants of this family just might be rebuilt. Time will tell. It was a devastating revelation.

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I had an interesting conversation with Dianna, my wife, the day after we had watched this film together. We had some time to mull it over, so I asked her, "Why do you think they named this film 'the Descendants'?" I asked HY the same question, and she gave basically the same response as Dianna... so, this is either a male/ female perspective thing, or I'm thinking too hard.

They both said, 'It's called 'the Descendants' because of the land... the inheritance... the family fighting over this plot of land. And perhaps that's it. Except that this wasn't really what the movie was about! That was the backdrop to a much grittier tale about love, faithfulness, family, greed, life and death.

So, I want to leave you with this. I thought about 'Descendants' in the sense of what we are leaving behind. The issues in this film were not only taking place in this 'slice of life', this time and place. But in many ways, they were generational. One generation passing along their dysfunction to another... and another.

And it seemed to me that Clooney's character, Matt, realizes that he needs to change the pattern. That he wanted to pass along something *better* to his children than the legacy he (and his wife) had been building. It took her accident/ her unfaithfulness / and ultimately her death, to bring him to this, but that was the end result. The land symbolized this, but the reality was deeper. And *that* is something that Scripture teaches us in many ways.

\*\* In our opening Scripture we read from Isaiah 44

*For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground;  
I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.  
They will spring up like grass in a meadow, like poplar trees by flowing streams.*

What we read here is that God's intention is for his blessings to be *passed along*. From one generation to another.

Paul talks about this as he writes to the young pastor named Timothy:

\*\* *I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.*

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Now, *that's* an inheritance!

“Two verbs have built two empires,” wrote Augustine, “the verb ‘to have’ and the verb ‘to be.’ The first is an empire of things – material possessions and power. The second is an empire of the spirit – things that last.

A spiritual inheritance is a lasting inheritance, it is a strong part of the verb ‘to be’ ...

What I've been thinking about as I reflect on this film, is the very thought of what I am passing on to all those I come in contact with during the course of a normal day, or on Sunday, or during a Bible study or just in the grocery store? *Something* is being passed on. Is it spiritual? Is it something that is going to last?

\*\* We are all building a legacy. We're going to have Descendants. Our children – and grandchildren, for sure. What are we passing on to them? Will it last? How are we living this out – not just what we *say* but by what we *do*? But what about our extended family as well – people here in this community of faith?

You know, every time a baby is baptized, or a young person is confirmed, or an individual joins this congregation, we all affirm that we will do everything we can to ‘nurture them in the faith’.

We'll support them and encourage them. How do we do that? Do you go up and shake the hand of the kids who lead worship on Youth Sunday, and tell them how you've been praying for them, and ‘thanks’? Do you tell the kids who sing for us, or play bells, or dance how much you appreciate their contribution to worship?

Do you teach Sunday school, are you a mentor? Do you learn the names of the new members?

We will all have Descendants... we're passing along *something* to the next generation. What is it? Jesus challenged the traditional definition of family:

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\*\* "Jesus asked, 'Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?' And stretching out his hand towards his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister, and mother.'" (Mt. 12:48-50)

And with that new understanding of heritage, we again ask ourselves: what has been passed onto us - and how will we pass this onto others? So whether we speak of blood ties or not, the responsibility falls to us. The prophet Joel writes:

\*\* Let the priests, who minister in the Lord's presence,  
stand and weep between the entry room to the Temple and the altar.  
Let them pray, "Spare your people, Lord!

Don't let your special possession become an object of mockery.  
Don't let them become a joke for unbelieving foreigners who say,  
'Has the God of Israel left them?'"

Like Abraham and Moses after him, Matt King was physically able to look out on his land and upon his descendants - and with that view, make the best decision not just for himself and his personal finances, but for his family and the community beyond himself.

Let us pray that our own life decisions are not seen as private matters that simply effect the few people closest to us (or, worse, are just about us) - but instead let us choose to live with a larger purpose in mind, for the benefit of a world that's greater than ourselves. Then, like the descendants of Abraham, we can truly change the world.