

The 1946 film, *It's a Wonderful Life*, is a wonderful movie. But it has a huge Biblical flaw at the heart of the plot. This otherwise wonderful movie has a completely non-scriptural and heretical view of angels.

In the movie, Clarence the angel is a dead human being who is now an AS2—Angel Second Class. And he's trying to earn his wings to become a first-class angel.

That's the kind of thing that drives clergy crazy. There's nothing in scripture that says that human beings become angels when they die. Angels are a separate created order. They are spiritual beings created by God. Angels are different from us, just like we're different from elephants. Humans are not dead elephants who have moved to a higher level. Likewise, angels are not dead humans who have moved to a higher level. All that stuff about the deceased getting wings, and playing a harp, and sitting on a cloud all day comes from cartoonists. But it's not in the Bible.

What Jesus himself says is that when we are resurrected, we will become LIKE angels in that we will be immortal and never die again.¹ But he never says that we will BECOME angels.

So in the movie, you have to take the whole angel bit with a HUGE grain of salt. But in spite of that, *It's a Wonderful Life* is still a wonderful movie, with a wonderful message.

It begins with a number of people offering prayers on behalf of one George Bailey, who is portrayed by Jimmy Stewart. George has hit a tremendous bump in the road. He's having the worst day of his life. That's why so many people are praying on his behalf.

The prayers do reach heaven, and some angels confer about how best to help George. They decide to send a junior angel named Clarence. And they show Clarence various flashbacks of events that have so far taken place in George's life. This takes up over half the movie. These flashbacks show that George Bailey is a nice, likable guy who has big ambitious dreams. He wants to get away from his small town. He says, "I felt if I didn't get away, I'd bust."

George wants to travel the world. He says that the three most exciting sounds in the world are anchor chains, airplane motors, and train whistles. He also wants to make his mark on the world. He wants to "build buildings 100 stories high, and bridges a mile long."

But George doesn't build big buildings. Instead he builds small houses for low-income working-class folks. He doesn't travel. His travel money gets spent on keeping the family business open. George doesn't get away from his little town of Bedford Falls. For a variety of reasons, he ends up staying there. And the main reason he stays is to act as a counterweight to the movie's villain, Mr. Potter.

Mr. Potter is wealthy and greedy. He's something of an Ebenezer Scrooge-like character. He's bought up most of the town. That is, with the exception of the Bailey family's

¹ Mt 22:30, Mk 12:5, Lk 20:36

small business, the Bailey Building and Loan. The Baileys provide loans to low-income working-class folks to get them out of the substandard rental housing owned by Potter.

Potter is so desperate to control everything that at one point he even offers George Bailey an enormous raise to come work for him. Plus he preys on George's weak spot. He knows that George feels trapped by life's circumstances, and trapped in Bedford Falls. So Potter offers George a huge raise, in our economy it'd be a raise from \$42,000 a year to \$395,000 a year, almost a 1,000% raise. And Potter promises George business trips to New York City, and occasionally even Europe. And George is tempted. Seriously tempted. But George refuses Potter's offer. And the Bailey Building and Loan stays in business, and continues as a thorn in Potter's side.

And then comes the day of the crisis. George's world crumbles around him. It's Christmas Eve. And George's befuddled Uncle messes up big time. He takes an \$8,000 deposit to the bank. That's about \$114,000 in today's terms, a fairly sizable amount. And by mistake, the Uncle misplaces the money, and it ends up in the hands of the wicked Mr. Potter. Potter sees this as a perfect opportunity to put the Baileys out of business. He calls in the sheriff and the bank examiner, and it looks like George Bailey will be heading to jail.

George comes home. He's uncharacteristically harsh and cruel to his family. Then he goes out drinking. Then he goes out to the bridge, and contemplates jumping off. Because of his life insurance, he's worth more dead than alive.

Clarence the angel intervenes and prevents George from jumping. In their subsequent conversation, George says, "If it hadn't been for me, everyone would've been a lot better off."

Clarence counters, "You just don't know everything that you've done."

George comes back with the statement, "I wish I'd never been born."

And so, Clarence grants him that wish. George sees what the world would have been like if he had never been born

George is confused at first. Then he's disturbed by what he sees. But Clarence says, "You've been given a great gift, George—a chance to see what the world would be like without you."

And in the subsequent scenes, George gets to see what life in Bedford Falls would have been like without him. And it's a bleak, dark picture indeed. Without George's influence as a counterweight, Mr. Potter reigns supreme in the town without any opposition. And the Bailey family takes a much more tragic path without George in their lives.

George learns that he's not worth more dead than alive. His life, his presence in the community, has had an effect that has rippled out in ways he wasn't even aware of. He may not have been a war hero. But he saved the life of his brother who later became a war hero. He may not have built long bridges and tall skyscrapers. But he put roofs over the heads of numerous

families. He may not have given his own family a life of ease and creature comforts. But he brought them love. And their existence would have been cold and bleak without him.

George's life seemed ordinary and unimportant. But the sum of all the things he had done made a huge difference in his world. His life did have meaning. His life didn't turn out like he expected. But it did have meaning, and it was a wonderful life.

In our Gospel lesson from Luke, John the Baptist is addressing the crowds who have come to him to be baptized. And today we hear a wonderful section that's unique to Luke.

John tells the people they need to repent. And the people want to know what that looks like. So John gives a very detailed and granular series of replies. He says, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."²

And when tax collectors come and ask what they should specifically do, John says, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."³

And when some soldiers ask what they should do, John tells them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."⁴

I love this sequence. John is telling ordinary people the ordinary things they can do in their own particular contexts to better follow God.

For George Bailey the pattern is similar. His grand dreams may have been unfulfilled. But in various, small ways, he had an enormous effect on the people around him. And at the end of the movie, he gets a stirring demonstration of how much the townspeople appreciate him and cared for him. His friends rally around him in his time of need, bringing their money to help him.

When George's war-hero brother arrives, he offers a toast, "To my big brother George—the richest man in town." Not rich in terms of money. Not rich in terms of fulfilled dreams and longings. Not rich in the big things we associate with success.

But rich in love. Rich in kindness towards others. Rich in the ways that really matter. George's life did have meaning. He did have a wonderful life.

Most of us will never be called upon to do huge, flashy things. But every day we're given little opportunities to do the small things that ultimately add up to make a huge difference. At school. At work. At home. Those opportunities are there. Helping someone who need a hand up. Resisting petty little evils around us. Giving of ourselves in small ways.

² Luke 3:11

³ Luke 3:13

⁴ Luke 3:14

Those little things add up. They do bring meaning.

Jesus once said, "If you give even a cup of cold water to one of the least of my followers, you will surely be rewarded."⁵

Make sure to do the little things that really matter.

That's the way of George Bailey.

That's the way of Jesus Christ.

That's the way that leads to a wonderful life.

⁵ Matthew 10:42