

THE VISION FOR LIFE PODCAST

Episode 169 | VFL Culture: Movie Review, Past Lives

Featuring: Autumn Gardner, Hunter Beaumont, and Michael Goldstein



Autumn: Welcome to the Vision for Life podcast, an ongoing conversation between the pastors of Fellowship Denver and the Church at large. Each week we talk about life, faith, the Bible, and how to follow Jesus as we go about our daily lives. I'm Autumn, host of the podcast, and today Hunter and Michael are joining me. Welcome.

Hunter: Autumn, it's great to be here. We are doing today our first ever Vision for Life movie discussion. Our listeners can judge if this is a good thing or a bad development, but we were going to just- me and you were going to do it, and then Michael overheard. Next thing you know, he's here. This is like talking about going to a Razorback basketball game and not inviting me. I'm going to find a way to get on that wagon.

Autumn: Michael just showed up in the recording room.

Michael: I was invited on the podcast. That said, if I found out you guys were doing this and I wasn't invited, I might have been looking for other jobs.

Hunter: We're joking because Michael is our resident movie expert, and you studied film in college, right?

Michael: I did. I have a BA in film and digital media from Baylor University.

Hunter: And right now I'm congratulating myself on saying "film" because that sounds like the educated man's way to say that. I like watching movies, but I'm not nearly the expert in their construction and how visually they're created as you are. So, I always learn a ton from you when I watch a movie and then talk about it with Michael. I always learn much, much more about it. So, thanks for joining us.

Michael: Yeah, absolutely

Autumn: And me? Well, I'm just here because I'm the host. I watch the least movies.

Michael: You were forced to watch a movie. You were forced to watch a movie.

Autumn: Yeah, Hunter said we should discuss this movie. So, I said, alright, I guess I'll watch a movie.

Michael: Brilliant.

Hunter: Well, have you watched the movie we're going to discuss?

Autumn: Yes, I have. Hunter, you did suggest this, so, that we do our first episode that is covering a movie. So, why are we discussing a movie, particularly this movie, *Past Lives*?

Hunter: We're going to discuss the movie *Past Lives*. And as I think I hope our conversation will demonstrate good art—and that could be a movie, it could be a novel; it tends to sit in that nonfiction space; good art could be a painting—it shows us themes of what is happening in our culture, in our world. It often shows us tensions, or it shows us developments that are happening, and it makes us aware of them in a way that we're not as aware of them or we don't reflect on them as much as if we haven't watched the movie or haven't read the book.

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So, that's what good art does. And if we want to live a considered life, an examined life, which is kind of one of the big themes of this podcast, Vision for Life, the assumption is God has a wonderful vision for your life that is told in broad strokes in the pages of Scripture. And embedded in the biblical Christian worldview is an incredible meaning and substance to a human life lived for the glory of God. And in order to live into that, we need to examine our lives and we need to examine the forces in our culture and inside of us that are pushing and pulling on us, and examine them in light of God's Word. And what good art does is it helps us see some of those forces often in our culture and our world and to think about them more clearly. This movie in particular, I think, does that really, really well. And so, I thought this would be a good experiment. Let's try discussing a movie on the Vision for Life podcast.

Autumn: Yes, and—I think, Michael, you pointed this out—we decided to go ahead and discuss this particular movie, *Past Lives*, because it's lovely. It is a lovely film. And we, the three of us, all enjoyed watching it. So, we hope through our discussion, we can demonstrate what you were describing a moment ago.

Hunter: That's right. We're not going to spoil it until the end. So, we will talk about some themes, but we're not going to give away the ending until the end of this discussion, and we'll make sure to alert our listeners to that. But they can watch this movie. It's on Netflix—I watched it on Netflix.

Michael: It's not on Netflix as of today, April 11th, but you can rent it for \$4.

Hunter: Okay. It's on Paramount+. Maybe that's what I did. Maybe rent it to Paramount+ if you have a Paramount+ subscription on there. It got some Oscar nominations last year.

Michael: So, yeah. So, the movie *Past Lives* came out in 2023. It got nominated for two Oscars, Best Picture and Best Original Screenplay. It was the feature debut from writer-director Celine Song, who is a Korean-American, or actually Korean-Canadian, who then moved to America. And the movie is semi-autobiographical and is a great feature. She was a playwright before making this movie, but hopefully she'll make more movies because it's quite fantastic. So, yeah.

Autumn: We'll examine a few themes in the movie, but particularly for those of you who may not have watched it, if you, like me, don't watch very many movies, we would encourage you to watch it. Even if you wanted to pause the episode now, watch the movie and come back and listen to it with the movie in mind, that would be a great. We suggest that.

Hunter: Yeah, do that. Especially if you're like Autumn and you live a mostly nonfiction reading life and your soul is impoverished. Stop right now. And go watch this movie.

Autumn: Wow, okay. All I was going to ask for was not input on my reading habits. I was actually just going to ask Michael to summarize the movie. Give us a sense of what it's about.

Michael: Yes. So, *Past Lives*, like I mentioned, came out last year, 2023. It was my favorite movie of the year, even over *Oppenheimer*.

Hunter: That's an excellent plot summary, by the way.

Michael: I absolutely loved it. This is just my pitch that you should watch it. So, the movie is- it's really kind of a three-act. And these three acts take place 12 years apart. So, it opens with a family living in Korea and a 12-year-old girl named Nora, or- she'll eventually take on an English name, Nora. And she has this little crush with a classmate named Hae Sung.

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And so, they have this kind of little date they go on. And then we find out that the family is moving, they're immigrating to Canada. And so, she has to say goodbye to this little crush, Hae Sung.

The movie picks up then 12 years later, and she has since- so, now she's 24 years old, Nora, and she lives in New York, and she's a writer. And through Facebook, she finds this- or he rather finds her. And they begin a relationship over Skype. And they kind of have this budding romance over Skype and this connection. But eventually, they both kind of have too many things going on in their own personal lives. And so, she decides to end it with the hopes of living in New York and kind of having more of her New York life and her career and all that. Now, along this same time, she goes on a writer's retreat and meets a guy, a New Yorker, and she gets married. And so, then the movie fades out and picks up again 12 years later. Nora is 36, and she's married, and she hasn't talked to Hae Sung in 12 years since they Skyped. And we find out that he's coming to visit New York. And we come to find out that really, the purpose is he's come to visit her. And the movie—this is really kind of the whole, the rest of the movie—moves in. It's like the last hour is this section. And it's just this propulsive tension between her relationship with this old crush from her former life and her husband, who she's married and committed to now. And woven throughout the film is this really strong reflection on, as the title suggests, our past lives. Who would she have become if she had stayed in Korea? And what would have been her life if she had stayed or had made a relationship with this guy versus what is her life now? And he represents a lot of her past. And so, this movie kind of propulsively moves forward to this breaking point of, will she pursue kind of more her past, or will she accept and move on with her future?

Hunter: So, many of us can relate to this theme of, who would I have become if I had taken a different path or stayed in a different place? Every time I'm in Arkansas, I have this thought, like, what if I had stayed in my old career and lived in this place that my family is from? Who would I be if I had stayed there? What would my life be like? I was literally yesterday watching the introduction of the new Arkansas Razorback basketball coach, watching his press conference. And before the event starts, they're just showing the crowd. And I'm watching several of my old friends, they're there, and they're just in the shot, wandering around, you know, talking to people. And I was like, man, if I just stayed in Arkansas, I would probably be right there in a blazer and a red shirt, welcoming the new basketball coach. And instead, I'm watching online from home in Denver.

Michael: It's impossible to watch this movie and not have that feeling of, like, if I had made some different decisions, who would I have become? And so, I went back to my hometown outside of Chicago a few years back. And I hadn't been back in like five years. And I came back a little messed up. I was hanging out with my old friends and just, what is this place that's- I've changed, and it's changed, but it feels the same. And this movie conjures up all of those feelings. And it's really- the perspective is told through Nora and her experience of this.

Autumn: And that sense, that question that we find so relatable, who would I be if I had stayed in a different place, if I had made different choices, is intensified through the movie because of the drastic difference in Nora's place that she came from in Korea and the traditions and sort of life that she experienced there, and then her new life in New York and who she has become since leaving. And so, she experiences a lot of sort of code switching between her past self and her past life and her current self and her current life experience in the movie.

Michael: Right, and Hae Sung represents that part of her that she's really moved away from. She's not in touch with, but then when she's around him, her whole Korean side really comes up because she's, at this point, she's a New Yorker. She's talks like a New Yorker. She's a New Yorker, but she can't ignore that she spent 12 years, formative years, of her life

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as a Korean. So, so much of the movie is just about her living in that tension of, am I more my past or am I more my current self?

Hunter: And that feeling is intensified in romantic relationships where there're those feelings involved. And so, this movie takes that element to and imparts it, which makes it especially powerful. And many of us can imagine, who would I be if I had stayed in that relationship or married that person? So, it causes a lot of reflection. And it might stir some of those thoughts up if you watch it.

Autumn: Before we jump into discussion of the themes of the movie, Michael, would you also just give us a sense of the style?

Michael: Hmm. Yes. This is a very simple movie. It's simple and subtle the way it's shot. There are not very many shots. There are not very many scenes in the movie. It's short.

It's only about an hour and forty minutes. But the movie is telling the whole theme that we just talked about, about you're living between your past and your current self, it's telling that with the camera. And so, there are a lot of shots that are essentially- you can almost watch the movie silently and understand everything that's going on because the way it frames Nora, it'll either frame her on one side or in the middle or on the other side of a person. You experience her tension of figuring out who she is based on kind of where she is in the frame. And so, there's a lot of just lovely shots of her walking around New York and talking to people and all of that. It just gives you really a sense of place, of where she is, and what's going on in her mind, because she doesn't often speak it exactly. So, you have to pick up on that.

Hunter: That where she is in the frame positioning is the kind of deep juju that I get when I talk to Michael. Because I don't notice that stuff, and then he points it out. I'm like, oh, wow.

Michael: Yeah. And this will kind of set us up to talk about the themes. But there's a scene at the beginning of the movie that is essential to the film, which is that when she's 12; her and Hae Sung are walking and talking, having this connection, and then she tells them, we're moving, and they get to a place, the camera pulls out, and you see that her house is up kind of a hill to the right and his house is straight to the left, and it's this clear fork in the road. And he just goes, "Bye." That's it. And then she walks right up the hill, and he walks left. And the movie's telling you everything in that shot. These are departing stories and departing lives and where they will go from here. And the movie works actually really hard to push them back together. So that's kind of what's going on with the frame and the camera.

Hunter: And this is where I point out that the two paths that seem to diverge, but eventually come back together, is a plot device in Marcel Proust's great novel series of serial novels. And so, I thought of that there. I was like, this is very pristine.

Autumn: We need to start a jar that you have to drop something in every time you bring up Proust.

Michael: Is Arkansas sports included in that?

Hunter: Yeah—Arkansas sports, Proust—that'll be my swear jar. And swearing, perhaps.

Michael: And actual swearing.

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Hunter: And actual swearing.

Autumn: I'll work on getting this together.

Michael: This is an amazing- This is like *New Girl*. This is an amazing idea.

Hunter: What if you're driving to work and listening to a podcast about Arkansas basketball and you cuss at someone who cuts you off in traffic? That's an expensive 10 minute drive to work.

Autumn: Yep, it could really stack up. This has some potential—for me. To return to our movie discussion... Although, it is interesting to think about the parallel between Proust, this device as Proust uses it, and the way it's employed in the film. And that they're both capturing some of the same meaning in the employment of that device to the moment in the movie that you're talking about, Michael, that is so symbolic. It also alludes to the fact that this was the pattern that their lives to this point, Hae Sung and Nora, their lives to this point had been intertwined. And it gives us the idea, plants the idea in our mind that they had walked this path home from school together every day, leaving at the same time, arriving to this point. And yet, this time it's different because the divergence is greater. She's leaving and moving away from Korea, and he's walking straightforward back to his family to tradition where he's going to stay. I think this leads us well into our discussion of the central themes of the movie. And the first theme that we identified that we want to discuss is exactly that tension. The film sets up this tension between tradition and family and opportunity and individualism and choice.

Hunter: And that tension is represented by the two primary settings, Korea and America. Korea represents the world of tradition. It represents the- it is a more communal culture. It is a culture that tends to not be as individualistic as American Western culture does. And then the New York represents modern American Western individualistic culture that also has lots of opportunity to become someone different and to explore. And Nora has transitioned from one of those worlds to the other. She grew up Korean, and she is in America and those tensions are represented in her, the tension between those two worlds is represented in her. Hae Sung lives in the old world, but he gets access to this land of opportunity through technology. And I think there's also a theme of how technology blurs the lines between the world tradition and the more individualistic world.

So, I see it depicted in the movie with just the settings and also technology. He reconnects with her on Facebook. They use Skype to connect, and that opens up in his mind this possibility that, maybe I could go there and see her. And maybe there's something that could happen between us again.

Michael: Yes, definitely. And you kind of- she explains a lot about Hae Sung to her husband, Arthur. And so, you learn more about what that looks like in his life. And so, and she'll say, this is more normal for Korea.

So, for example, he joins the military right after the first cut from when they go from 12 years to 24 years—12 years later is him in the military. And that's really where he begins to think about her all the time because he's got nothing else to do. And then she's just kind of- she falls in love in a very New-Yorky kind of way, in a very Woody-Allen-movie kind of way. She goes to a writer's retreat and falls in love with this guy conveniently. And then meanwhile, he's struggling to have a relationship and get married.

And there's this scene where they talk about marriage, Nora and Hae Sung. And she asks, why haven't you gotten married? And he says, it's complicated because the girl I'm interested in, she comes from a wealthier, more well-to-do family. And he says, I'm ordinary and I don't have status. And she's kind of like, that shouldn't matter—are you in love? And you see, she has this very American, Western individualistic view of marriage. And she says, we're like two trees growing in the same pot, where our roots need to find their own way. Which is kind of this American view of marriage. And he is still- he lives with his family. He lives with his parents still, and it's very normal. He's more committed to job and duty. And he's more restricted in that way. And so, you can see how their two lives are kind of represented differently in that.

Autumn: It sets up this tension because the assumption, probably an assumption that we all inherit to some degree in our Western American context, is that choice. So, freedom, the ability to chart your own path, the representation of many different choices, a way you can create yourself. New York represents that. And we kind of inherit the assumption that that is good. That freedom, the choice, the ability to create ourselves, is good. Another notable novel that really wrestles with this theme is Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. In it, the central character, Esther Greenwood, feels trapped by the assumptions about who she should be and the type of life and woman she should be. And so, she pursues choice and finds that she is just as trapped by the many, many choices that she encounters as to what she can fashion herself to become.

And so, I think this is—you mentioned Proust, we see it in Sylvia Plath—this is part of the story of the Western world, and it's captured really intensely in the movie via this comparison between Korea and New York. And Nora, the main character, wrestling with what Korea represents for her and whether or not that is actually what she wants or what New York represents for her and whether or not that is actually what she wants.

Hunter: And I don't know about you guys, but as I was watching Hae Sung wrestle with whether or not he was going to go to New York to try to meet up with her, and he's talking with his friends in Seoul about that, and I'm kind of going, don't do it, don't do it; It's not going to go as well as you think it's going to go.

Michael: The second time when he's older?

Hunter: Yeah, yeah

Michael: Yeah, they're like anybody's friend. They're like, you're going to New York, huh? Isn't that old girl there? And he's like, oh, I'm not going for her. And they are suspicious. And you are one of those friends in that moment. And you're like, dude, this is the worst idea. They're like, isn't she married? Oh, it's just like makes your skin crawl.

It's interesting. The movie makes no judgments over Western culture or traditional culture. It's not trying to tell you one is right or better than the other. It merely just points out to us. And I think as we have a reflection on the movie, we can just see sort of how it puts Nora in this really difficult position of what a lot of us struggle with in the modern world. Choice anxiety is, I have a lot of options in front of me, and how do I choose the right one? And if I do, is it the right one? “Is it my destiny?” kind of thing.

Autumn: That's essentially the second theme that we identified that we wanted to discuss. The first theme in the movie that's interesting and very relatable and is important to think about from a Christian perspective is this tension between tradition and family and opportunity and choice, and how sometimes those are not only in tension with each other, but

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sometimes they're opposed to each other. And the second theme, which Michael is leading us into here, is the proliferation of choices. So, the many, many choices that we are offered that we do have readily available to us and the illusion that they create. How does the movie set up that theme or how do we see that presented to us through the movie?

Hunter: Nora's family had chosen to immigrate to Canada and to this Western world because they wanted a new life. And you can, you can feel that if they had stayed in Korea, their choices would have been limited. And like we've already pointed out, we are prone to think that this expansion of choice is a really good thing. And yet the movie is kind of showing us that we can get trapped in always pursuing new options. And this pursuit of new options can mean that we just never commit to one thing. And that becomes its own kind of prison, its own kind of captivity. And it's very easy for modern people to think as long as we're experiencing new things or exploring new things or keeping our options open, we are free. But life is moving on and there are consequences to not committing. And the consequences to not committing could be its own kind of captivity in a sense.

And so, I think we summarize this as the proliferation of choices and illusion they create. There was an article I read, a review of the movie, a reflection of the movie by one of my favorite writers, Samuel James. He wrote this about this movie. He said:

Modern life, untethered as it is from givenness and tradition, poses a contradiction. The more we flex our economic and social freedom to move, resign, divorce, and start over again, the more adrift we seem to become in the ocean of decision. Many people struggle to overcome a paralyzing sense that they've made the wrong choice, or that something better is passing them by.

Or, I might add, that something better is out there. Just think of dating apps. There're always better people if you'll just wait another week.

Like a prisoner who is given a window just big enough to see enough of the outside world to know he's excluded, socially mobile types cannot go very far before the mere possibility of an alternative suggests regret.

So, there's this captivity to regret, or end this captivity to just always staying in perpetual, keeping-my-options-open mode.

Michael: Yes. And there's a scene that I think captures this visually really well in the movie. And there's this montage of their relationship when they are Skyping back and forth, which is- it's good they did in a montage because it's pretty boring to watch a movie about two people Skyping. But at the beginning, there's this excitement in them connecting. They look at each other and she just goes, "whoa". And it's like this like- it's cute; it's sweet the way they're connecting. And it gives you the feeling of when you first start a relationship and there's the newness of it. And then you can see that it's taking so much of their time. And there's this time change, and she's like, two in the morning, trying to connect with him. And it's just becoming a big thorn in their life. And so, that's when, you know, they decide to cut it off, or she decides to cut it off. She closes her laptop, and then the camera immediately pans to her window. And you see the skyline of New York and the sun is rising. And it's saying, your life was small through this screen, and you closed it. And now look at all of New York and the sun is shining. All the possibilities are available to you. And that's kind of the illusion of this this choice that is held out for us. And I'll just tell you just to get a little personal on it, I had a Skype relationship with Jillian, my wife. Originally, that's how we were a long-distance relationship. So, I was really relating to that. And I

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remember when it was getting to that point where we'd been together for years and I only kind of really- ever had seen her at this point, you know, all in Skype.

Hunter: You had never seen her at this point, it was all in Skype.

Michael: She was an hour and a half away, so we would still see each other quite a bit. But then I moved to Colorado and she was in Texas for a year. And so most of our relationship was over FaceTime and Skype. And I remember she was moving here, and I was right in that place of, this is probably when I need to decide if we're going to get married or not. And I was feeling like she was the one, but I was- I couldn't- I didn't totally know. And I was kind of wrestling with the, how do you know? How do you know? And you probably don't even remember this, Hunter. But I was like 23. I wasn't even on staff yet. We went out for what was that old sushi place by Grant Street we used to go to.

Hunter: Oh, Mount Fuji.

Michael: Mount Fuji. We're at Mount Fuji, with me and Adam. I don't know why we were there. And I was just talking about how I wasn't sure what to do. And Hunter just goes, "Eh, marry her. It's almost Christmas, buy a ring. That's your Christmas present. And there you go. Get yourself married this summer." And I walked away from that, I kid you not, and I was like, I'm going to go buy a ring and marry her. I just needed someone to be like, what are you doing? What else do you need? Just, that's it. You're with a good person, and you have a good relationship, and that's what marriage is. And I just was like, oh, it's so clear.

And I actually felt more free because I was confident in choosing something than kind of what we often feel, which is just if I choose something, I'm saying no to too many other things, you know, which I think the movie kind of really gets out.

Hunter: Well, and what your narrative is, the commitment opens up possibilities that non-commitment cuts you off from. And so, the possibility you have you have two daughters now and a son.

Michael: Yeah, even a son.

Hunter: Even a son. Just to have this life of a family and to raise these kids is a possibility that getting married opened up to you that was that was cut off while you stayed while you kept your options open. And that is the counterintuitive wisdom that we tend to forget in this modern world that brings us lots and lots of options. And we can we can feel Nora especially wrestling with this question of if she's going to commit to the man when she's married, there is a sense in which she's married him, but she's not in her heart totally committed once this new possibility opens up. And so, we are kind of left with that tension and watching that get itself worked out.

Michael: Yeah. And the new possibility represents potential regret over what would have my life looked like if I had made different choices. And I think this is just really important for Christian discipleship. I think, especially in Denver. So many people I meet in Denver, they're here but they're constantly living with a holding out the possibility that something else might be out there. And they're like, I'm not looking right now. I'm not looking to move. I'm not looking to change jobs. But I just, you know, it kind of exists in this place. And I see that actually can be crippling to some people, and the feeling of what if there's something better? Or, what if what if I'm not giving my kids the best neighborhood, the best school? Or what if I'm not in the best job? It can pile on. And part of Christian discipleship is to say, yes to a place and yes to a

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community and a people and a church. And not to say you never move, but to be accepting and satisfied with what the Lord has given you in that season of life. I think it brings more joy and it brings more blessing to those around. So, kinda what I thought about.

Autumn: Now, I think that's so insightful, Michael, and we're capturing this since that there really is a dilemma, a dilemma that the film represents, a dilemma that we experience in our day-to-day lives, in relationships with friends and people at our church and in our communities here in Denver, and that we have to wrestle through too. As we are choosing what we're going to commit to. Sometimes those are big choices like choosing to marry someone as you shared in your story, Michael, choosing to propose to Jillian. That's a big step of commitment. But we wrestle with this too in so many small ways. And I love the way that you phrased it, Hunter. There is a counterintuitive way in which committing to something both small, often and in larger decisions opens up the door to so much more, to more opportunity and more often more growth, beauty, and experience, and relationship than we could imagine when we remain stuck with the possibility of regret, sort of in that decision paralysis. So, these first two themes, the tensions between tradition, family and opportunity and choice or individualism; the commitment dilemma, because we are faced with so many options in our modern Western cultural framework; and then the third theme we want to talk about is that there's this real metaphysical aspect to the movie. So, what do we mean by that?

Hunter: Metaphysics is asking the question, what is the structure of reality? Often the structure that we don't fully even understand or comprehend or control, but it's there. It's the givenness of reality, the givenness of things. What is real. Gravity is the example I use a lot. But God is the question of, who is God and what is God like and how do we know God? That's the ultimate metaphysical question. If there is God, and God is truly a *god* God—not a god that we've made, then we do not control God. We don't get to vote in what God is like. We only discover God as God has revealed Himself to us, and we decide if we want to live in line with who He is or not. But God is the ultimate metaphysical reality. We know that in the Christian worldview.

We also know in the Christian worldview that God has a purpose and a plan for history and for humanity to glorify Himself, and He's going to bring His kingdom to earth. And we know that's His plan. We know that the gospel is ultimate metaphysical reality that God is choosing to reconcile sinful people to Himself and will one day eradicate the world from all the effects of sin and righteousness that we brought into the world and set up a perfect kingdom where He is perfectly glorified. We know that that's metaphysical reality. This film doesn't have a Christian metaphysical reality underneath it, but it's wrestling with this, what is the unseen structure of reality that's shaping and forming even the choices we've made or the consequences of the choices that we've made? It's asking that question, and it has a metaphysics that it's wrestling with. And I think Michael can probably explain that better than I can.

Michael: Yeah, there is a spiritual undertone to the movie, and it's this concept called In-Yun, which is a Korean concept. I'd never heard of this concept. Have you guys ever heard of In-Yun before?

Hunter: This movie introduced me to it. That's why I asked you to explain it.

Michael: I can't even say it. And she introduces it when she's out at this writer's retreat and she first meets who eventually, Arthur, who becomes her husband. And she says, she goes, "I think it comes from Buddhism." She doesn't even know; she's a playwright in New York. So, she doesn't have a religious attachment here. But again, going back to her past and her tradition, she kind of pulls this concept. And In-Yun is the concept that when you have an encounter with someone in your present life, it means that you've had maybe a past encounter with them in a previous life. So,

somewhat the idea of reincarnation. And it could have just been a brush. It could have just been you looked at each other on the sidewalk, but that moves forward into your future and creates that connection. So, it brings this kind of romance and whimsy to the film. And then he goes, “Do you believe that?” And she goes, “I don't know. It's just something that Korean people say to seduce each other.” And so, she's even kind of just using it as a pickup line. But then later, her and Hae Sung talk about In-Yun. And you could tell he actually kind of believes it.

And so, there's this idea of our memory. We might call it nostalgia, our past—does it have this meaning? Is it putting us on a trajectory? And so, we could say it like, are Hae Sung and Nora soulmates? And the movie really wrestles with this. Well, if they're soulmates, then shouldn't they be together? We've kind of been trained to think this way through American film and the stories we read—shouldn't they be together? And even as you're watching it, you're like, man, they are soulmates. And you don't know why, but maybe it's this spiritual connection that they have. The only problem is she chose to get married to a guy. And he might not be her soulmate. And so, the movie is wrestling with that friction and that tension, which I think really pinpoints a lot of what we wrestle with in our life and romantic life as modern people today as well.

Hunter: I also see Hae Sung as more of a believer in, how do you say it again? *In - yoon*. In-Yun. I see him as more of a believer in In-Yun. And she's a little bit more skeptical of it, but not totally dismissive of it. And in some ways that represents where many Americans in particular are. They are not completely dismissive of metaphysical questions and metaphysical reality, and they're not dismissive even of the existence of God and the possibility that God has a plan that He's working in history. They're not dismissive of that, but they're also a little skeptical of it. And sometimes it's kind of a wink and a nod and then more traditionally minded people are more confident in the metaphysical structure of reality. And that's a tension in our in our world right now. So, I could be over reading that, but I see him as a little bit more of an evangelist for this idea and her as a little bit more of a maybe.

Michael: Well, and then there's the question of just is the film, does the film believe in this? And again, visually, you have that scene at the beginning where they separate, which are their lives, their past lives, you know, to use the name of the movie, are diverting. And then later they come back together 24 years later in New York, there's a converging of them or emerging of these past lives.

And so, that's the movie kind of going, you know, is that encounter now coming forward? And is this in you? And is this fate?

Now, as Christians, we believe that everything that you said, Hunter, that the metaphysical reality of our life is that God has a plan for the world. He says He sent His Son, Jesus, as a plan that He's working out in history, and that it's moving towards a direction and that we are part of that and a meaningful part of that. And we live our living our lives in that reality is a lot more concrete. And the longings that kind of In-Yun creates are satisfied in the gospel, which was one of the things I just thought about in this is it's a lot more clear, you know, that Christian metaphysical reality.

Autumn: This metaphysical aspect of the movie is introducing a couple of questions that the film itself wrestles with and that we can ask along with it because we ask these questions in our in the normal course of our lives as well. And so, the film is sort of, maybe if not answering, leading us to some kind of lingering conclusion about the questions. But Scripture really does answer these. And so, the first is, how do you reconcile your past? And we see Nora wrestling with, and Hae Sung also wrestling with, that through the course of the film. But what would either of you, Hunter or Michael, say to that question? How do you see that being developed? And then what does Scripture answer when we ask that question?

Hunter: We have a doctrine in Christianity, the sovereignty of God. And it acknowledges that God is the ultimate metaphysical reality, to use our language here. And we don't fully understand how we both make real choices and decisions that are genuine expressions of our desire and God is sovereign. But Christianity holds those two things together into a mystery. It doesn't resolve the mystery in favor of determinism, which would say God just controls everything, therefore our choices don't matter. And it doesn't also resolve the tension in the direction of what philosophers sometimes called libertarian freedom, which is just that we have free choice. And therefore, God just isn't sovereign in any real sense. Now, there have been theologians in historically within the Christian tradition and currently who would try to resolve that tension in the direction of determinism or libertarian freedom. But the consensus is that you've gone beyond what Scripture is saying. Scripture acknowledges that God is sovereign and that humans bear real responsibility for our choices, and our choices are genuine reflections of our desires. And some of the greatest theologians ever, starting with Augustine, and in the American tradition, Jonathan Edwards is by far the towering intellectual giant theologian, they have really worked out, I think, pretty satisfying answers, at least satisfying in so far as Scripture tells us satisfying answers to the compatibilism of God's sovereignty and human responsibility. And so, we hold to—I often will summarize it for just normal people like this—we live by God's commanded will, meaning when we decide what we're going to do, or when we are evaluating what choices we're going to make, we look at what God has commanded and we make choices that are consistent with what He has commanded. There's a whole realm of choices that don't have do-or-don't commands to them. And we live by God's wisdom that He's revealed to us in Scripture, and we make our choices. So, we live by God's Word, by His commands, and the wisdom He gives us in Scripture.

We use that and we make choices that are consistent with that. So, we live by God's commanded will. We live with God's sovereign will. And God's sovereign will in Scripture is especially used as to comfort us when we face regret, when we face disappointment, when we even struggle with the consequences of our own sin, or when life is just not going as we want it to or we're suffering. This is where God's sovereign will is presented to us as the comfort. And you hear this in Paul the Apostle saying, "God works all things together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purposes." And elsewhere he'll say, "This light and momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory." And we don't know exactly how all these afflictions are preparing us for this eternal weight of glory, but we're assured by God's sovereignty that it is. So, I think the most satisfying answer to this is found in the Christian metaphysic and the God of Scripture, the God who has sent His Son Jesus to give His life for us and who has created a kingdom where death will be defeated and has given us assurance of that through the resurrection. To me, that's the most satisfying metaphysical story. It doesn't remove mystery, but it puts mystery in the right places.

Michael: Oh, very well said. Just to pull it back a little bit into the film, this is actually one way that we don't only just want to be critical of a film's worldview because it's not Christian, because I found a lot of beauty and truth in it. And one of them is the way that the confidence Nora shows and actually the commitment she made to her husband. And there's this really important scene in the movie where they're laying in bed together—and her husband, Arthur, is— I think he's a dweeb. Jillian liked him; I think he's a dweeb. He plays video games—no offense, Jesse—by himself while she's out on a date with her former crush. You know, he's just kind of an insecure New-Yorky guy, and she constantly describes Hae Sung as manly. That's one of the main ways she describes him.

Hunter: Physically Hae Sung as a more striking lad.

Michael: He is a little bit, yeah, more striking. The actor who plays Arthur is like kind of this funny comedian. Anyway—but he's just not known for his physical prowess. And so, he obviously is a little insecure about her getting

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together with this guy, Hae Sung, who's clearly come to New York to see her, and he's confessing this to her like, you guys have a better love story than we do. And you know, our story is not that interesting. And almost he's saying, to what you're saying, Hunter, is like, fate chose him for you and not me. And that's kind of how he feels. And she says, this is my life and I'm living it with you. And he questions that like, are you sure? And then she says, this is where I ended up; this is where I'm meant to be. Almost an acceptance of, she wouldn't say the sovereignty of God, but that mentality I think is really secure. You sense that she gets security and confidence from it. She's not your typical rom-com, insecure, I-don't-know-what-I-should-do, and I need this guy. She's very confident in saying, because my life ended up this way, I know that that's what it was meant to be. That's how I know it was meant to be. I found that really encouraging, actually. I don't know if you guys felt that way.

Hunter: Well, I think this is a good time to transition into the ending or the spoiler. And so, this is where Jesse inserts his spoiler alert audio cues.

Autumn: Which, because this is the first time we've ever done this kind of episode, it's the first for this cue.

Hunter: I'm sure he's got a great one.

Michael: Well, allow me to say, if you want to watch this movie, do not listen-

Hunter: -stop now!

Michael: You need to not know what happens at the ending because it is tense and it is incredible.

Hunter: Okay. So, that's a great pre-spoiler *chong chong*.

Michael: It's like one of my favorite endings in any movie ever. So, there you go.

Hunter: But I would say this, since probably half our audience is now going to drop off, I just want to say, if you do like these Vision for Life movie discussions, send Autumn an email and let her know podcast@fellowshipdenver.org. Submit a film. And if you don't like them, send Autumn an email, let her know, because Michael has got a lot more of these queued up that he's ready to do. So, stop the train now. If you got it, you got to vote now or this train-

Michael: It's the Michael for Life podcast

Hunter: -might get off the tracks. Okay, spoiler alert.

Autumn: yep.

Hunter: Queue the music, Jesse.

Autumn: And so, Michael, as you've been giving us insight into the way the film moves along, as we get to the ending, how are these themes pulled together? So, what happens? And then how do we begin to see these themes come to a conclusion, if not a reconciliation? Yes.

Michael: Well, there's an amazing scene in the movie, which is inspired by a real experience in Celine Song, the director's, life, where they go to a bar, it's late, New York, and it's Nora, her husband Arthur, and Hae Sung. And it's the

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most awkward, tense bar meeting you've ever experienced in your life because she's translating between the two. But eventually- so, the camera does this, it shows all three of them, and she's in the middle. And so, you're put in the tension of she's caught between two worlds, the Korean world, traditional world, and her modern life. She's caught between two men and somewhat of a love triangle. And then what the camera does is it slowly moves in and cuts Arthur out of the frame, her husband, and just focuses on Hae Sung and Nora. And they have this in Korean—so, Arthur has no idea what they're saying—more candid conversation about their relationship and their life. And it's wonderful. It's beautiful. They talk about In-Yun. And then the movie moves to a climax of he's leaving, Hae Sung is leaving, and she says, "I'll walk you to your Uber." And so, they have this long, silent walk. And it's a mirror of the beginning of the movie where they're, she and Hae Sung, are 12 years old, and they're walking, and she's crying at the beginning, and he's comforting her, and the beginning of their little crush. It totally flips it 24 years later. And there's this long, silent walk along this dimly lit street in New York. And it's just so tense because you're like, what is she going to do? What is she going to choose? What is going to happen? And then they sit there silently, his Uber comes, and he gives a little speech about how they have In-Yun. And so they can say goodbye now because they'll meet again in the future. And then he leaves her with, "See you then," which is amazing. And then she walks back, the camera follows her back to her husband, and she, since the beginning, for the first time since the beginning of the film, she cries. And he comforts her. They walk in and two doors close. And it's like her accepting what she said earlier, this is my life. And it's her choosing commitment to her husband. And the fact that he comforts her when she's crying shows that now she's closed the door on that past life. And she's now open to this really committed marriage.

Hunter: And as I said earlier, you get the sense that she's married to him, but maybe she's not committed, and it ends with now you get the sense that she's committed to him. And you begin to imagine, what is her life going to be like? What is their life going to be like? And it's going to be good. It's going to be better. And the movie doesn't tell a story, but it leaves it to your imagination. But it is a very redemptive illustration of the freedom of commitment.

Autumn: I think that's a perfect conclusion, Hunter. Michael, thank you for joining us. Hunter, thanks for joining in on this conversation and suggesting that we discuss a movie. H mentioned this a moment ago, but send us your thoughts. I always ask for your thoughts and input as I close out these episodes because I really love hearing from you. So, let us know what you thought. Should we discuss more movies in the future? And if you have a great one that you want to consider, then send it our way. As always, you can send questions, suggestions, your thoughts about today's episode to podcast@fellowshipdenver.org.

Thanks for joining us on the Vision for Life podcast. Special thanks to Adam Anglin for our theme music; to Jesse Cowan, our producer; and to Judd Connell, who provides transcription for these episodes.