

At the Movies
Hail, Caesar!
February 26, 2017

PRELUDE – The Saving One
Worship Song – Alleluia, He Has Loved Us

Announcements / Survey – Shannon
Feature / Offering – From the Day

Would you pray with me?

Lord Jesus, we just want to stop right now and say “thanks.” Thank you for *making a way* and for *being the way* that we can be saved. Amen.

Good morning everyone!

This is the third installment of our *At the Movies* series – so far we’ve looked at *The Revenant* and *Arrival* and today we’re going to look at *Hail, Caesar!* which was released about this same time last year. I’m curious ...

- a. How many of you saw it in the theater?
- b. How many of you watched it because of this series?
- c. How many of you are mad at me because I picked it?

From everything I've read (and heard from some of you), this is a movie you either love or hate. Obviously, *I loved it* – and I think you'll see why as we go along – but a big reason a lot of people didn't like it is that there is so much going on in it that it's a little hard to follow.

And the reason there's so much going on is that this a *movie about movies* – real movies that were produced by Hollywood from the 1920s through the 1950s. Almost every scene in *Hail, Caesar!* contains at least one callback to a movie that was produced in that era. Every major character represents a real Hollywood personality or composite of personalities. One character is even given the name (Carlotta Valdez) of a never-seen

character in Alfred Hitchcock's movie, *Vertigo*.

So, half the fun – if you like classic movies – was trying to figure out who was who and what movies were being referenced.

The downside of that? Entire scenes – massive productions – that had absolutely nothing to do with the plot of the movie ... other than to introduce a character and/or highlight a particular genre of movies, such as:

Singing cowboy westerns (think Gene Autry/Roy Rogers)

Tap-dance musicals (think Gene Kelly/Frank Sinatra/Sammy Davis, Jr.)

Synchronized swimming aqua-musicals (Esther Williams)

Parlor-room cocktail dramas (“High Society”)

And even a biblical epic called “Hail Caesar! – A Tale of the Christ” which was the most

obvious callback of all, to “Ben Hur” which is also subtitled “A Tale of the Christ.”

Trying to pack all of that into an hour and 46 minutes meant that the plotline – the story the Coen Brothers were actually trying to tell – became a little obscured from time to time.

But never fear, we’ll unravel the whole thing this morning and also, as is our purpose in this series, show how this movie illustrates a spiritual reality similar to what Jesus did when He told parables. So often He would say things like “the kingdom of God is like a business owner going on a journey who left his servants in charge of the business.”

And then He would tell a story about those servants and that owner that would illustrate an important truth about us and about God.

And that – hopefully – is what will happen this morning. So let’s get into it.

Basic Storyline

What is this movie all about? Obviously, it's about movies and moviemaking but, at the core ...

This is a story about Eddie Mannix: the life he lives and the job he has.

Eddie is a “fixer” who works for Capitol Pictures. (And there actually was a real Eddie Mannix who did the same thing back in the day for MGM Studios, although the Coen Brothers have made it clear that the Eddie in their story is not intended to reflect the “real Eddie.” Apparently, the real Eddie was not a very nice man.¹)

In any case, Eddie's job is to make sure that all of the studio's productions keep humming along without missing a beat. Sometimes that means solving problems on a movie set and sometimes that means solving problems in the lives of the people who work for the studio, as we see in one of the opening scenes.

Video Clip - 01 The Fixer (1.7 min)

(Begin) Eddie sits in a car at night

(End) Eddie: “Shinebraun”

By the way, when Gloria (a.k.a. “Mary Jo”) sees and Eddie and says “Jesus Christ on a scooter” she means it offensively. But, trust me, there’s more going here than simply a character taking the Lord’s name in vain. We’ll get to that a bit later.

In addition to handling the Gloria’s of the world, along the way Eddie also has to deal with ...

- A director upset about a cowboy actor miscast in his parlor-room drama
- An actress who is pregnant but doesn’t want to marry the father
- Two gossip columnists who also happen to be twin sisters.

But his greatest challenge will turn out to be managing the studio’s biggest production of the

year – that biblical epic known as *Hail, Caesar!*ⁱⁱ

Let's watch as Eddie checks out some pre-production footage.

Video Clip - 02 Hail Caesar! (1.6 min)

(Begin) Screenshot: “Capitol Pictures Presents”

(End) Fades as Eddie smokes

Given that the movie deals with biblical material, one of the obstacles Eddie faces includes ensuring that the way “The Christ” is depicted is theologically accurate. (Apparently, the studio wasn't too interested in *historical* accuracy because Saul's vision happened well after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus).

In any case, to accomplish that, Eddie calls in several “religious experts” to discuss the matter. As we watch, pay particular attention to his confused reactions at some of their statements.

Video Clip - 03 Cut the Mustard (2.2 min)

(Begin) Eddie: “You’ve read the script ...”

(End) Rabbi: “I haven’t an opinion.”

What a classic scene.

Eddie soon discovers that he has an even bigger and more pressing problem. The star of *Hail, Caesar!* – Baird Whitlock – has gone missing.

At first, everyone thinks he’s just off on a bender. But Eddie soon receives a note from a group of Communist screenwriters calling themselves “The Future” demanding \$100K in exchange for Whitlock’s return. They’ve kidnapped him and so, as “the fixer,” Eddie’s job is to:

- Come up with the money ...
- Make the exchange ...
- Get Whitlock back on to the set as quickly as possible ...
- All while keeping his name out of the news ...

... which might turn out to be a little more challenging than he hoped.

Video Clip - 04 People Want to Believe (2.0 min)

(Begin) Eddie: “What can I do for you, Thora?”

(End) Eddie: ““We’re gonna give it to ‘em.””

Did you catch Eddie’s rationale as to why Thora shouldn’t dish the dirt on Baird Whitlock’s past? “People don’t want the facts,” he said. “They want to believe. That’s our great industry.”

Now, while all of this is going on at the studios, Baird Whitlock has awakened from the knockout drug his captors used in his kidnap. He walks into a room where a discussion is taking place – it’s “a study group” he is told – and though he tries to engage, it becomes obvious he doesn’t quite understand why he’s there.

As we watch, notice the similarities between this group and the religious experts who earlier met with Eddie.

Video Clip - 05 It's Science (1.9 min)

(Begin) Dr. Marcuse preparing to speak

(End) Whitlock: "... pick it up right here at the next study session?"

And of course, the answer is no ... because he's their hostage.

Now, at this point, we're starting to get a clue as to what might be a common theme running through this movie.

- We've seen an argument among the theologians over what's true concerning "the Divine Presence."
- We've seen Thora and her sister Thessaly, claim that people want the facts. They want to know the truth.
- And we've heard the communists argue that their position isn't rooted in make believe. It's based on "science."

Try to hold all of that in your mind and let's fast forward to the climactic scene of the movie which, I hope, will make it even clearer.

Long story short, Baird Whitlock is rescued by singing-cowboy turned romantic-heartthrob, Hobie Doyle, while his captors are in a rowboat meeting up with a Russian submarine offshore from the beach house where they've been hiding out. (It's crazy but, remember, this movie is intended to be a farce).

And, since Whitlock has returned, *Hail, Caesar!* can, at last, be completed.

Watch what happens as they attempt to film the final scene.

Video Clip - 06 If We Had But Faith (2.3 min)

(Begin) Whitlock (Autolochus) walking to the foot of the cross.

(End) Whitlock whispers "Faith."

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 2>

“A truth we could see if we had but *faith*.”

That, when you peel away all the subplots and the extravagant spectacle of big name stars who parade through brief cameo appearances ... *that* is what this movie is about: *truth and the faith to see it* ...BUT ... not about truth and faith in the spiritual sense.

A Crisis of Faith

Make no mistake, this is *not* a religious movie. In fact, it's actually intended to be something of an “anti-parable:” a *spiritual* story with a *secular* point, instead of a *secular* story with a *spiritual* point (which is what Jesus did when he told parables).

Bottom line, I think the Coen Brothers are playing a bit of a trick on us. They've spun a wild tale dripping in religious imagery and metaphors to make a single non-religious point, which is that ...

Movies (and the people who make them) really do matter. It's a worthy industry and a worthwhile effort.

In fact, that's the internal struggle that's going on inside of Eddie throughout the movie.

In spite of the fact that he confidently tells Thora, "people don't want the facts, they want to believe that all of this is real," Eddie knows differently because *he himself is having a crisis of faith*. But it's not about God (in spite of the confusion with the theologians); his faith crisis is over the significance of his work. And he's reached the point where "just believing" isn't enough.

In fact, Eddie's struggle sounds a lot like the beginning of the biblical book of Ecclesiastes ...

... where "The Teacher" exclaims:

*Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!
What do people get for all their hard
work under the sun? Generations*

come and generations go, but the earth never changes. We don't remember what happened in the past, and in future generations, no one will remember what we are doing now. Ecclesiastes 1:1,3-4,11 (ESV/NLT)

You ever felt that way about your job? Your task? Your calling? That's what Eddie is going through.

We learn this fairly early in the story when we discover that he's been offered a really swell job at Lockheed Martin and is giving serious consideration to leaving the studio and the industry.

In this scene, which is his second meeting with "the tempter" – I mean, the recruiter from Lockheed – pay close attention to how the exec describes Eddie's profession.

Video Clip - 07 Oddballs & Misfits (1.8 min)

(Begin) Eddie: "Sorry to keep you hanging."

(End) Waitress: "Call for you Mr. Mannix."

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 3>

“Your industry,” Eddie is told, “has no future. It’s frivolous. And your work? Really it’s just babysitting oddballs, misfits and kooks with their crackpot problems because it’s all based in make-believe.”

And after the *third meeting* between Eddie and the exec in which the deal is sweetened even further with “stock options guaranteed to vest,” and a comment that “work for us and you’ll be running a business, not a circus,” Eddie’s story is beginning to look a lot like another biblical story.

The fourth chapter of Matthew’s gospel tells us that ...

Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted there by the devil.

Matthew 4:1 (NLT)

Three times, Satan comes to him and on the

third visit, Matthew tells us that ...

The devil took him to the peak of a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. “I will give it all to you [your stock options will vest!],” he said, “if you will kneel down and worship me.” *Matthew*
4:8-9 (NLT)

In other words, “Stop messing around with misfits and oddballs, Jesus. Come work for an organization with its head in the real world and not make-believe.”

Now, Eddie’s threefold temptation (complete with red lighting) is the tip-off that we are not to think of him as a mere man in the world of *Capitol Pictures*. In the words of that first “misfit oddball” we met in this tale, Gloria DeLamour, he really is “Jesus Christ on a scooter.”

Eddie Mannix is the savior of this make-believe world. The question is ... will he resist the

temptation to bail? Or will he conclude that being savior is worth it?

In a scene which mimics The Garden of Gethsemane (wherein Jesus – I’m talking about The Real Jesus – agonizes over whether or not to go to the crossⁱⁱⁱ), Eddie comes to a decision.

Let’s watch.

Video Clip – 08 Do What’s Right (2.1 min)

(Begin) Eddie: “May I ask you something, Father?”

(End) Black-out after Coen Brothers screen

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 4>

Notice the similarity of that ending to the speech given by Baird Whitlock’s soldier at the cross:

Why shouldn’t God’s anointed appear here among these strange people to shoulder their sins?

Here, in this sun-drenched land ... of Hollywood

Why should he not take this form?

The form of an ordinary man ... Eddie Mannix.

A man bringing us not the old truths but a new one.

A truth beyond this world.

A truth told not in words but in light ... the movies.

And so, like The Real Jesus, Eddie chooses to remain faithful to his calling and mission.

Unlike The Real Jesus, however, Eddie never faces crucifixion—just another day on the set.^{iv}

Grace & Truth

Now, as I said earlier, I think the Coen Brothers are playing a bit of a trick here by intentionally creating an anti-parable – using religious imagery to make a point about their industry. And, to be completely honest, I'm pretty impressed by their trick. These guys are amazingly creative!

But what I'm going to do at this point is to turn this trick back around on them because, whether they intended to or not (and I suspect not), they have created one of the most vivid illustrations I've ever seen of *the one characteristic* that defines Jesus – the Real Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth – more than any other.

That characteristic is spelled out in the very first chapter of the Gospel of John, which begins in this way:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. John 1:1-4 (NIV)

But then an amazing thing happened, John writes:

The Word became flesh and took up residence among us.

Why shouldn't God's anointed appear here among these strange people? Why should he not take this form?

*We saw his glory—the glory of the one and only, full of grace and truth, who came from the Father ... For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came about through Jesus Christ. John 1:14,17
(NET)*

In other words, if you want to know all the rules (and you should), then consult Moses. Read what he wrote in the books of the Law (Genesis through Deuteronomy).

But if you want to know God's heart towards those who fall short – to those who ignore and break his rules, then you need to know Jesus, for he is full of grace and truth.

And what that means is (if you believe in Him and follow Him) ...

- He never lies to you about you.
- He never sugarcoats reality about your sin.
- He never says, “Oh, that’s OK when it’s not.”
- He never rewrites the rules just for you.

That’s what it means for Jesus to be full of truth.

But for Him to be full of grace – and that’s kind of an interesting word picture, that Jesus isn’t *half* truth and *half* grace but *full* of truth and *full* of grace at the same time – for Jesus to be full of grace means that (if you believe in Him and follow Him) whenever He rebukes you, whenever He disciplines you, whenever He judges you in truth

...

- It is always for your good.
- It is always designed to build you back up.

- Grace means that Jesus treats you far better than you deserve.

And when Baird Whitlock is returned from captivity full of new (and, quite frankly, blasphemous-to-the-studio) ideas gained from his communist captors, the way Eddie Mannix reacts to him is full of truth and full of grace.

Let's watch.

Video Clip - 09 You Have Worth (2.0 min)

(Begin) Whitlock: "These guys were pretty interesting ..."

(End) Eddie: "Go out there and be a star!"

Now, here's the point of that.

Truth says: "Baird, you're a numbskull and you need to be slapped silly until you wake up to reality!"

And that's what Eddie does for him.

I know a bunch of people who could use that kind of treatment, don't you? All of us could in some way.

But grace says: "Baird, even though you have failed, you still have worth. I still believe in you. Go do what you were made to do. Go be a star."

And that's what Eddie does for him as well.

I know a bunch of people who could use that kind of treatment, too. Maybe some of us?

In fact, *all of us could* in some way because, like those servants in Jesus' story about the business owner who goes on a journey and leaves the running of the business to them, you and I have been entrusted with a purpose and a mission here on this Earth – which is to bring glory and honor to God, whether it's through our jobs or our families or how we serve him in the collection of misfits and oddballs known as the church; or even

through our suffering.

But we fail. We fall short. We sin. We're lazy. We're uncommitted. We're playing around with stupid ideas like Baird was. And for our own good and our growth and our healing we need to accept and agree with God that this is true of us.

But we also need to believe in His grace; that in spite of our sinfulness, we still matter to Him; that He is not finished with us.

We know that because Jesus gave his life – he died on the cross – and then rose from the grave so that we could not only be forgiven of our sin and set right before God but also so that He could send us back out into the world as His children who, in the words of the Apostle Paul, “*shine like stars* in a world full of crookedness and perversion.”^v That's the real goal of the salvation we sing about and talk about all the time around here.

And maybe what I'm about to do is going to put

too much weight on this anti-parable which I'm re-parabalizing but I want to you show you the meat of that clip again because I want to make this as personal to you as I can. Every time I saw this part of the movie, it brought me to tears because I thought, "that's me, Rick McGinniss."

So this time as you watch it, I want you to imagine that this is you and Jesus. I want you to imagine that the dumbest most disobedient thing you've ever thought or done has just been revealed to Him.

Ok, here we go.

Video Clip - A1 Go Out There and Be a Star (0.4 min)

(Begin) Eddie: "You're going to go out there ..."

(End) Eddie: "Go out there and be a star!"

Let's pray together.

The truth is, those of us who believe in and

follow you are a bunch of misfits and oddballs, crackpots and kooks. Grace is you decided to love us anyway. You decided to keep using us to fulfill your purpose and ours anyway.

Agree ...

Believe ...

Come ...

Amen.

As we close this morning, we're going to stand and sing a worship song together. Please don't leave until it's over so as not to disturb everyone else around you.

And then, next week, we'll move on to our next movie, Zootopia.

Let's stand together and sing.

Worship Song – The Saving One

Endnotes

ⁱ <http://www.denofgeek.com/us/movies/eddie-mannix/252576/the-real-history-of-hail-caesar-and-eddie-mannix>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/poptheology/2016/02/hail-caesar/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 26:39 & Luke 22:42

^{iv} <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/february-web-only/tale-of-christ.html>

^v Philippians 2:15