

IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE

Directed by Frank Capra
Produced by Frank Capra
Distributed by RKO Radio Pictures
Released in 1946

It's a rich story of redemption that has inspired generations. Indeed, *It's A Wonderful Life* is hearty, stick-to-your-ribs entertainment not easily forgotten. And there's more to it than you might think. Pottersville, a vision of decadence and destruction presented by guardian angel Clarence to his quarry George Bailey, illustrates a reckoning of fate/providence/destiny in the same way time travel movies apply theories of the space-time continuum. More specifically, in *It's A Wonderful Life*, Capra and company unwittingly present a discourse on the interrelation of free will and predestination. What George Bailey is seeing in life without George Bailey is a working out of the concepts that have puzzled theologians for centuries.

Pottersville is what Bedford Falls would have become were not George Bailey born. Clarence, outside the 'Ma Bailey' boarding house, says, "Strange, isn't it? Each man's life touches so many other lives. And when he isn't around he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?" The 'hole' he refers to is the place in the milieu that George was supposed to occupy. But if George was supposed to fill that 'hole,' then what we are seeing is very problematic. A deistic view of God, that He is the watchmaker who sets the world to running, but does not intervene, means no divine intent. Thus, no hole would be there because, under the deistic view, George Bailey would exist or not exist (it would depend on the decisions of his forebears and George's ability to stay alive) and the good or evil he would accomplish would be George Bailey's doing, not the result of God working through him. So if there's a hole, it's an indication that the designer's intent wasn't realized.

But God, as presented in the film, does not passively observe. He intervenes, responding to the prayers for George Bailey by sending the angel Clarence. (The delegation of duties to St. Joseph the Nebulae can be dismissed, for our purposes, as distracting whimsy.) George, as evidenced by his anguished prayer in Martini's bar, is not convinced of God's existence. The vision of Pottersville shows George that God is real, that He accomplishes His objectives through the good works of men, and that there is an indispensable place for George Bailey, a hole that only he can fill.

So where does Man stop and God begin?

Contrasting portions of the Bible, and the dictates of logic, provide that salvation is either by choice or election. Choice entails righteous living and/or an acceptance of Jesus as the Savior of mankind, while election means that God chooses His flock before individual people make a move to accept or reject Him. Calvinists believe God does all the work, that man has no say in his salvation. In contrast, the hyper-Armenians believe God leaves our salvation totally up to us. We can accept Him or deny Him, but He will not influence our decision.

Now, some have speculated that free will and predestination are intertwined—that God chooses those who seek Him, giving them the faith for subsequent belief. This nuanced

reconciliation of the two concepts differs from a more blunt conclusion: Reconciling free will to predestination is a challenge on par with comprehending the incarnate Jesus Christ as fully God and fully man.

There's a Latin maxim, *unius est exclusio alterius*, the inclusion of one thing implies the exclusion of another. For example, if it were said, Everybody with a ticket can get into the concert, the implication is that only those with tickets can get in. But there's still the possibility that something was left unsaid—like everybody without a ticket can get in, too. Because, to start with, it wasn't only the people with a ticket who could get in.

The Bible never says that it's only predestination, or only free will. There's a lot left unsaid. And what we see as holes to be filled with logic may actually be portals to the pathways of faith. Perhaps, beyond the human strictures of logic, the contradictory can become complimentary. *It's A Wonderful Life* seems to think so.

When Clarence references a 'hole,' he means that George Bailey was intended to exist and do what he did. But Clarence insists that Pottersville is what would have happened to Bedford Falls were George Bailey never born. So without George Bailey, Harry will fall through the ice and die, old man Gower will poison that kid, Uncle Billy will go to an insane asylum, Martini's will become Nick's, and the Granville house will rot. Even the most unlikely consequence, Mary staying single, has to happen. We don't have omniscience, so we cannot discern what are the true consequences of any one event. There's too many threads to the tapestry. But God, who is omniscient, does know the exact reason for everything.

George wanted to see a world where he was never supposed to be born, but that wasn't possible. From the beginning of time, God knew George Bailey and had his future in mind. So Pottersville is a fabricated world that never could happen. But it's not a lie—it's an approximation of how life would spin out of control were not God intervening. *It's A Wonderful Life* strongly implies that God foresees all possible worlds but actualizes only one. Thus, the deistic idea of an alternate reality and the theistic concept of an intervening God overlap to bring a new color to our view of life.

If God steered the people of Bedford Falls to make the decisions they did, resulting in Potter's pre-eminence, George would not matter. Any decisions he would make for good would not be of his own free will, but pre-ordained. Maybe only George Bailey could accomplish the tasks necessary to keep Potter from ruling. Maybe God intervened on Christmas Eve 1945 but rarely does otherwise. Regardless, George Bailey never existing means George Bailey never making any choices, let alone good ones or bad ones. As Edmund Burke said, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." It's a riddle—maybe we do, each, have a purpose and a role that only we can fulfill. Maybe it's because only we can do it, and maybe it's because God allows only us to do it.

George Bailey is being shown that the choices he made were a powerful force for good and that God always planned for him to fulfill that role (which is especially interesting considering George Bailey never did what he wanted to do). In the same way, a man accepts Christ without an instinctual desire to do so, while God always knew what that man would decide. Flannery O'Connor said, in prefacing the second edition of her novel *Wise Blood*, "Free will does not mean one will, but many wills conflicting in one man. Freedom cannot be

conceived simply. It is a mystery...." Perhaps something inside us does cry out for God. The question is whether that something is of us, or of Him.

Though *It's A Wonderful Life* is explicitly about sacrifice and friendship, what resounds is its gentle affirmation—we are not alone. Our sufferings do not go unnoticed. And while life seems to be defined by tragedy and disappointment, the hope of a new creation is available in Jesus, Who became like us so that we could become like Him.

With its dark vision of a world without God, *It's A Wonderful Life* reminds us that there is a reason for everything—both the good and the bad. We understand very little, but we can achieve much more than our selfish earthly desires would limit us to. We can, unwittingly, be agents of the divine.