



21 GRAMS (Cert 15)

Reel Issues author: Stephen J Brown

Overview: Love, hate and redemption in the aftermath of loss. A critically acclaimed story of lives intertwined by tragedy

Director: Alejandro González Iñárritu (2003)

Icon Film Distribution

Caution: Contains strong language and some sexual content

SUMMARY OF PLOT

The emotional upheaval of three Middle American lives is explored. Ex-convict Jack Jordan (Benicio Del Toro) works with drug addicts, trying to instil in them their need of Christ. He and his wife (Melissa Leo) struggle to provide for their children. Paul Rivers is a college professor (Sean Penn) terminally ill. A heart transplant might save him. His wife (Charlotte Gainsborough) aspires to have a child by artificial insemination. Cristina Peck (Naomi Watts) after a reckless past is a devoted wife and mother of two little girls. A traffic accident kills several people and gradually it becomes clear that the lives of Jack, Cristina and Paul are intertwined. One party has inadvertently caused tragedy to another through which the third member of this trio benefits.

The film is a meditation on how love and hate in the aftermath of loss brings in its wake forgiveness, redemption and purpose. The title refers to the fact that the human body becomes twenty-one grams lighter at the point of death, begging the question whether that is the weight of one's soul.

SOME KEY ISSUES

Living and dying - It is clear that we are all dying. For some, death would put them out of their misery. There

are others who keep on hoping for something more than just existing.

Parenting - The film is populated by childless women yearning to be mothers and men who are ambivalent about becoming fathers or ashamed or joyful about it.

Bereavement - Each character has a journey through feelings of hate, revenge, hopelessness and bewilderment. Faith does not necessarily bring comfort.

CLIPS AND IDEAS FOR RESPONDING

The following three clips could be shown as one item. The sequence is near the beginning of the movie.

Clip 1a (Chapter 1, immediately following film title, approx. 1 min)

We are given an ideal of family life as Michael (Danny Huston), tells his two young daughters it is time to go home from the cafe, prior to tragedy striking. We see his wife, Cristina, tell a support group how much her family have helped her change her life. The sheer arbitrariness of what is about to happen will all but sink her.

Clip 1a, (Chapter 1, approx. 3 mins)

Jack's is a muscular kind of Christianity. In this scene does he impress those in his care by being tough yet a believer? His faith is to be sorely tested.

Clip 1b, (Chapter 2, approx. 2 mins)

In hospital, Paul seems to be bereft of the hope which his wife struggles to give him. Things subsequently seem to get better for him.

Small groups discussion and feedback

- What are your initial emotional responses to each of these main characters?

Buzz session

- How attractive are these people to you? Does that matter in terms of being able to empathise with them?

Whole group discussion

- We already know that we are on the verge of tragedy with these people. Things happen to them we wouldn't wish on our worst enemy. What spiritual equipment do they appear to have to get them through it all? Perhaps there are elements of plot and characterisation, comfortable or uncomfortable, which connect with your own experience.

Clip 2 (Chapter 13, approx. 3 minutes)

Paul, now "well", feels an obligation to the man (Cristina's husband) whose heart he has been given. Acquiring a gun, he seeks out the man responsible for the deaths of Cristina's family.

"Killing Jack Jordan" - small groups activity, or discussion

- One person in each group to assume the role of Jack Jordan, with another playing Paul Rivers. The rest of the group form a circle of chairs around these two who are seated face to face in the centre. "Paul", full of hate and disgust at Jack for his driving that wiped out most of a family, keeps asking Jack to give him some good reason for not killing him. Jack, full of remorse and deeply depressed, vacillates between wanting to be punished but, as a Christian, fearful of what such a killing would do to Paul responds each time with an answer. Any of the rest of the group may intervene by placing their hands on one or other of the protagonists' shoulders and taking over the role.

Small groups discussion and feedback

- Afterwards, discuss how it felt as well as the strengths of the arguments employed. At the end, be sure everyone who has played one or both the parts is de-rolled. ("You're not "Paul"/"Jack". You're Sally/Dominic. Say if for yourself". "I'm not "Paul"/"Jack". I'm Sally/Dominic).

Clip 3 (Chapter 15, approx. 2 mins)

Jack is having to live with the fact that, despite his faith, he has done a terrible thing in killing three members of a family. We see him back in jail, visited by his pastor. This time he is a Christian but looks far from happy.

Small group activity

Read out these words of William Blake:

"Joy and Woe are woven fine,
A clothing for the soul divine"

Discuss with them what these words mean to them. Jack has had a Christian conversion experience (before the film begins) and it gives structure and certainty to his hitherto chaotic, criminal life. Now he is discovering that it is no protection from awful things happening to him. How is he to respond to woe?

Give each group member a blank sheet of paper. Ask them to fold it into four long strips. Invite them to write a joy they have had on one of the sections of paper, then a woe on the next section, then a joy on the next section, and finally another woe in the last section. (This takes time). Then ask them to make them into four separate pieces of paper each containing a woe or joy. They are now being asked in turn to let go of one of their joys or woes. People may want to say what it is that they are letting go of.

The same procedure is carried out each round until everyone is left holding onto one slip of paper which

represents a joy or woe they have. This is “the pearl of great price” something, good or bad, which has perhaps taught us much. Perhaps in the end we have or will be strengthened in our faith by it. It may still be a feeling very near us, one that perplexes us and needs dealing with at some point.

Perhaps light a candle and, while people hold their remaining slip, allow a moment of reflection. Respecting the different spiritual positions of members of the group, invite them to think of or silently pray with the others as they grapple with the joy or woe they are hanging onto.

GOD'S STORY

The characters in the movie are close to dying or people close to them have died. It is death that pushes things forward in their lives. Through death, they discover life.

2 Corinthians 4.7–12 – Paul describes himself and certain others' experience as being like earthenware pots containing an infinite treasure which comes from a transcendent power. This potential lies in each of us, waiting to be graced by the Holy Spirit.

- The film's characters find a strength within and beyond themselves by which to continue. There may be loss but what are the gains?

Matthew 16.24–28 – We must leave an inappropriate or inadequate sense of ourself behind, take up our cross and follow the way of Christ. Accruing earthly power and wealth is not the same as discovering our soul.

- There is always choice, even in the face of adversity. What re-evaluations are there for the people seen here? What movements towards and away from our true self can be found in this film?

Job 42 – We are usually out of our depth, hardly knowing what is going on in ourselves, let alone the world. We agonise and rant over things too wonderful for us to understand.

- Is there any getting of wisdom in 21 Grams by its characters? How does it come about and where might God be in all their strivings?

Stephen Brown is an Anglican priest, group trainer and internationally known authority on feature films. He regularly broadcasts, teaches and writes for the Church Times and others about films.

© Bible Society 2004. Permission is given to make up to ten copies for use within a single Reel Issues discussion group.