

Saving Private Ryan
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Do you recall the movie Saving Private Ryan with Tom Hanks? It's one of my favorites. I recently watched it again. It's a gut-wrenching movie, showing the gruesome, bloody horrors of war. (There are scenes I still can't watch.) Its message haunts you and it's taken time for me to figure out why. The message is a religious one and it's about Christ – although Jesus Christ only appears in the film as a swear word. It's a totally non-religious movie about a totally frustrating and horrible human situation (war) – that's deeply spiritual.

The story is that a mother has lost four sons in WWII. Word comes to a general that her last remaining son (the youngest) is fighting in Germany. The general, for public relations reasons, gives orders that the boy be found and brought home alive. The job is given to a platoon of Rangers, battle-hardened experts in warfare. They go across German lines in search of this young kid, Private Ryan. Eventually they find him. Ironically, he doesn't want to leave his squad, but must. The Rangers are all wondering why they're risking their lives for this kid, who means nothing to the war effort. Saving him will not end the war any sooner.

They start back toward American lines and have various skirmishes with German units. In these, despite their skill and self-less heroism, they all eventually die. The captain of the platoon (Tom Hanks) as he dies, says to the young Ryan, "All these have died saving you. Do good with your life."

The next scene is 60 years later. The kid Ryan is now an old man who's returned to the cemetery in Europe where these Rangers who died saving him are buried. He's standing before the captain's grave staring at his name on the white cross that is the headstone. White-haired and stoop-shouldered, he's now an old man, his life almost done. You see his wife, children, and grandchildren in the background talking casually, unaware they are standing on what is to Ryan holy ground. The old man suddenly pulls himself ramrod erect to attention and salutes the captain's grave with all the military respect and honor he can scrape together, remembering the young soldier he once was. His wife comes up behind him. He turns to her and asks with a deep need to know, "Am I a good man?" She says nonchalantly, "Don't be silly, dear, of course you are." "No, I'm serious, have I been a good man? Have I done good?" The camera pulls back and up, showing the thousands of white crosses. End of movie.

What a burden it must be to have someone die to save your life. Even worse to have a platoon of people die so that you'll live. A man plunges into a river to save a drowning child, but in doing so loses his own life; someone overpowers a crazed gunman in a shooting spree in a McDonalds and dies in the process, but has saved others; a fireman pulls a child from a burning building, but is himself consumed by the flame. Such things are rare, but they happen. What a burden to have put on the rest of your life. A real

bummer – another brick on the load. Everyone here has had a mentor in your life, someone who gave you real help. Imagine if that person had lost their life doing it.

How difficult that must be to accept, to live with. We all love our independence, our self-reliance. I don't want to owe anything to anyone, I want to go my own way, do my own thing. I want to "Do it my way." But I'm only now able to do it my way, because of someone else giving me my life again. No escaping it – that obligates me to this person. I'm only able to do what I do because of them. I'm stuck with this person in my life. I feel an obligation to live as meaningful, as honorable, and as good a life as their death for me was meaningful, honorable, and saving. No getting around it. I'm in deep debt to this person and my actions are payment. The life of the one who gave me mine back is shown in how I live. The further good they would have done if their life had not ended, is now up to me to show, to express, to communicate, to do. That's why the elderly Ryan, asks, "Am I a good man? Did I 'do good'?"

Jesus died a long, long time ago. He died so that we may live eternally. He was sent behind enemy lines to rescue us, to bring us back alive (and not just for publicity purposes). He even had a platoon of Rangers (apostles) with him, not one of whom died a natural death. He asked us to "do good." In our world now, where most people believe that even if God did exist, he long ago drifted away, do we still after all these years live for, because of, with, and out of a need to give our answer to Jesus' death? Does he live in us and we in him?

If you, like me, believe Jesus has inspired countless people to acts of self-sacrifice; if you believe the humbling self-giving love Jesus taught is what you need; if you believe that truth, meaning, and a worthwhile life (the "do good") is found in living a life as Jesus wants – then you, like me, are not living for yourself alone. You're stuck with having to live as meaningful, honorable, and good a life as Jesus' death was and resurrection is.

The Lord does not require us to stand at his grave and snap off a military salute. He does want us to "love one another as I have loved you;" care for the sick, protect the weak, put others first – ourselves last; give of what we have to honor Him who gave it to us; and follow his other teachings that enable him to be in this world through the lives he saved. Our lives are not our own. They belong to Him who saved them and gave them again to us.

AMEN.