Movies and Family

Part 2 of 2: Review of Heaven is for Real
with Darrell Bock, Tim Basselin, Chip Dickens
Release Date: October 2014
Let's come back to -

But you asked me about Heaven Is For Real.

Yeah.

My take on it was it surprised me. It touched me in ways that I did not expect. I think I kind of went into it wanting to think about it and kind of critically analyze it, not critical necessarily being negative but just analyzing it and understanding it, and it really connected to a deep part of me that believes in Heaven. I mean I don't know how to say it any differently than that, and I'm not sure that I could explain it either. I mean it's belief, it's mystery, and the film was able to connect that for me.

Now I looked on Rotten Tomatoes at the reviews, and they're about 50/50, people who said this was good enough to go and see and people who said this is a waste of time, and I suspect, I don't know this for sure at all, but I kind of wonder if you've had that sort of deep feeling about Heaven before or of a hope that's really deep in God and such, if it just kind of taps into that. I know it's not gonna work for everybody, but for me it did. It tapped into that in ways that I didn't expect.

This film was hard for me in the sense of thinking about what to do with it in this podcast 'cause I knew I was going it in part to watch, and I walked out and the ambivalence that you're describing is very much what happened to me. I watched it and I said, you know, there are theologically things in here that I don't think I would embrace, but the thing that I was having trouble putting together and yet the overall thrust where the movie was taking the person watching it, and I don't know what other word to use other than the sweetness of the family life.

That boy's face.
Darrell Bock

That right, that sweetness of that four-year-old and the sweetness of that family life, the way in which the family was portrayed in that movie to me was so simple and powerfully done simultaneously that I'm sitting here going that was an element that to me in some ways trumped elements of the theology of what was going on in the movie, because at the core what the movie was trying to say, there is something more to life that makes life, and this is an experience that's designed to reinforce that. That point, regardless of how I view the details, was very much something I identified with. So this conflict, I hate getting so clinical about liking movies, but this conflict that I felt, I walked out and I said this film left me in a – I'd say it this way – in a neutral place that really wasn't neutral in a way that most films don’t.

Tim Basselin

I do not understand what you mean by that.

Darrell Bock

Well the point was is that the conflict between saying, all right, this wasn't a theologically satisfying film in terms of the way it delivered the theology, but it was a very satisfying film in the way it delivered life, okay? So in that standpoint I'm sitting here going, “I think I can live with the bracketing off of what's happening here theologically because of the way life is portrayed, and I actually think, I may be making more of this movie than I ought to be, but I actually think that's part of what frustrates me about the portrayal of Christianity in our culture, and here's what I mean.”

There are a lot of people who live a very simple Christian life in our culture. They aren't out to push against anybody. They just simply live out their faith as best as they know how. They may even do so in a context of some theological illiteracy, but their faithful commitment is to be as faithful and as sweet a group of people as you'd ever want to imagine. You know I used to meet them in the public schools when I was working on the PTA and that kind of thing, and our country is literally loaded with these people. What I would call, this is really dangerous, but in some ways the real silent majority, not the silent majority that makes noise but the real silent majority of how people are trying to live their life.
That's what I thought was portrayed very, very effectively in the film, and it's like this huge secret that most people don't know about, and there it was on the screen, and I'm sitting here going, yes, that's the way a lot of people seek to live. They're just trying to be good neighbors and get through life the best that they can, and I thought the film portrayed something that you don't often see portrayed at that level that Hollywood normally doesn't mess with.

**Chip Dickens**
Yeah I agree, Darrell. I think there's something really compelling about that. It's not old-fashioned. It's not something that's trying to reach back to “better days gone by”. There's something that's just really simple and watching life and day-to-day activities get lived out faithfully, that's really compelling.

**Darrell Bock**
Yeah they're hacking their way through life. I mean -

**Chip Dickens**
It's just simple and it's beautiful. It's really kind of cool in that sense.

**Darrell Bock**
And it goes everywhere from the broken leg that the pastor had at the very beginning of the movie and this series of setbacks that were a part of the story and yet deep underneath this movie is another thing that's going on that's very much like the experience of the key character in Saving Mr. Banks, and that was this lost child, this miscarriage that took place that was floating kind of underneath the surface and pops out at the end and that also is making the point about how certain experiences in our life really are defining, and part of the connection that happens between the mother and the child at the end is a part of the experience of the child going to Heaven is this awareness this child seems to have of this lost child recovered in some ways. Very powerfully portrayed.

**Chip Dickens**
I see this theme not just because of this movie but you see it in commercials, you see it in marketing, but there's this I guess I would call it more of a humanistic kind of trend that really values what children bring to our understanding of the mystery, almost kind of like there's a bit of an un-taintedness about them. As we as adults live life in this world we become a little bit more -

**Darrell Bock**
Jaded.
Chip Dickens

Yeah, handicapped in a way, and so humanism has that idea that if you could dig down deep and kind of almost reverse engineer everybody we could get back to kind of a more innocent, honest, wise. I'm almost kind of tired and my family is tired of hearing me every time I see like a Honda commercial I've got some six-year-old telling me I've got to buy that car, but the idea is that that's the sage in the commercial. The younger one is the wiser one and almost kind of more like the trusted messenger, and you get that sense even in this movie too that you can really believe what he's saying. If the same message came from somebody else you might question it more, and again it goes back to that kind of reductionistic, more simplistic, this is a really faithful message.

Tim Basselin

Well along those lines, one thing that I noticed between the two movies that I thought was pretty interesting is, maybe y'all will, maybe you won't, in Saving Mr. Banks you have a very non-Christian film that's dealing with the rough realities of this world, and yet its push is towards hope and towards beyond, towards some sort of transcendence, and story does that for us. We re-imagine a hope over and over and over again, right? That's what storytellers do. Heaven Is For Real kind of does the opposite.

So Saving Mr. Banks is moving from here going that way; Heaven Is For Real spends the whole movie convincing you that Heaven is real and for the mom it's that scene where the boy remembers his sister that was a miscarriage, and she finally comes to really believe that he had a vision of Heaven or went to Heaven or something, and yet right when you start to come alongside and say without reason, bypassing reason and all that, I believe that Heaven is real. The scene at the end where he speaks to the whole congregation and he's been struggling with that inside of himself the whole time, and then he invites the whole congregation and the community to come to the church, and he speaks about whether or not Heaven is for real.

And what he has on his piece of paper is that it says "On earth as it is in Heaven", and that's the emphasis of what his message is, is to say, he goes on to say "You've seen Heaven in the care of a mother for her child" and all these different ways, and yet we still choose to believe and embrace a hell of hate and that sort of thing, and he ends up saying "I believe Heaven. I believe my son because I see elements of Heaven here." Why that's significant for me is that both of them kind of push into the mystery of it. We tend to land on one side or the other like the incarnation or the resurrection, right?
We tend to just wanna have hope in resurrection, and then we don't take the incarnation seriously. We don't take dealing with the stuff here and actually living in it very seriously, or some take that very seriously and they don't really have the hope in the sense of the beyond. These films in very different ways push us into the tension and mystery of both of them being real. You can't have a Jesus who simply comes and is incarnated, a God who comes and is incarnated and then dies. That doesn't work for the Christian faith, right?

**Darrell Bock**  
That's right.

**Tim Basselin**  
Nor can you have a simple human who was born who is resurrected and becomes God. You have to have both and how those work we don't understand and it's a mystery, and these stories for me pushed me into that from two different directions.

**Darrell Bock**  
Yeah and actually for me the thing that's really important here is that sometimes we present the Christian faith as if it's about, if I can say it, wiping a slate clean and what will happen eventually, and there's this huge gap, this between place that is actually life, and sometimes we risk not pouring that content into what's happening in the midst of that life, and part of what we are committed to really is the rationale for why we have the podcast, is to show that that story, that place is not only taking us somewhere that one day will be a much, much better place, but there also is an engagement in which God is moving and shaping us in the midst of the life experiences that we have that is relevant and that theology creeps into all kinds of corners of life.

It isn't just tucked away to some future time, and that's important to realize. In a subtle way, I think Saving Mr. Banks gets you to raise those questions thinking about how life is impacted by your parental relationships and what you do out of that, and in a more direct way Heaven Is For Real confronts that and tries to get people, particularly by the way the movie wraps up, to think about if Heaven is for real then what does that mean for us now? And both are very, very important.
The Table Podcast  Movies and Family

**Chip Dickens**  I love that. I love that it's not just if Heaven is for real, okay, where do we stand on that issue, let's debate it. It's like what is the domino effect? What is the implication for life today, life this week? And those are sometimes that's where the real fruit. You get the scene played out where theology really makes a difference.

**Tim Basselin**  And why the movie worked for me I think is because it connected those two things inside of me where there is a tendency to just think about Heaven being for real and start talking as they deal with in the movie, the preacher starts talking about Heaven. I've preached for years and years and years about Heaven.

**Darrell Bock**  Here's the architectural design of what it's gonna look like and who's inhabiting it, etc.

**Tim Basselin**  Exactly, and it ends up just being a hope that's beyond that you talk about and not something that affects how you live every day. So the movie did that for me. It reconnected that deep feeling of hope and trust and belief in Heaven with what does that mean for my everyday kind of existence.

**Darrell Bock**  Well I'm gonna make one last shift here in the time that we remain 'cause we've talked a lot about the films and what they generate and how they help us view life. That's important. The dimension of the film that in my mind brought these two films together and why we should discuss them side-by-side is the whole importance of family dynamics and both films in one way or another really land hard on the importance of family dynamics, and so I kind of have a two-fold question that I wanna wrap up with. One is thinking about the in-tact family and the impact that in-tact families have, because obviously you have two very different kinds of families in these movies, one in which a father at one level is trying to do his best for his daughter but had so much inner personal stuff going on with himself that he was actually damaging the very thing he was trying to protect.
That's Saving Mr. Banks, which is an interesting kind of tension, and then you have what I would call this sweet, almost idyllic portrayal of family even though they're going through hard things. This is a mostly functional family that we're seeing on film. So you've got those two realities. You've got that part of the dimension and then of course the other dimension that’s very real in our world is that many people live in really broken family systems. They don't have two parents and so they may be raised by a grandparent or something like that and there's something filling the gap and the impact that that has on people.

One of the things that I think is underneath all these films was the importance of these core parts of our community in terms of forming who we are as people. So now I'm turning to our psychologist friend here and saying, okay, in 50 words or less, how important is what we're seeing in these films?

*Chip Dickens*

Yeah it's really neat. It's neat to get those issues kind of talked about just like you would say it's good to talk about some theological issues. It puts it on the table. I think the same could be said about those of us who observe and try to intervene with families and relationships. The Saving Mr. Banks movie, you're exactly right, the father character is not an abusive drunk, he's an endearing drunk. He's loving and he's warm and he's playful and he's adventuresome and he's destructive and he's careless and you're right, there's something very interesting about him as a person.

But as far as family dynamics go, he totally has botched it. You almost get the sense that the attachment between he and his daughter are of more value or more importance than even his own relationship with his wife, and we see this a lot of times in families today where they kind of get that priority of relationships turned upside-down I would say even in Christian homes. In counseling settings you see parents, one parent or the other overly attached to a kid for a lot of different reasons and it's not good. It's not good for the kid. They don't have the emotional capacity or the psychological competence to kind of bear the -

*Darrell Bock*

To bear the weight.
The Table Podcast | Movies and Family

Chip Dickens - to bear the weight that that calls for, and so but kind of in our culture we've tried to elevate children so much that it's not been for their good. I tell my kids, we've got a 16-year-old and a 13-year-old, that "I loved your mom a lot longer than I loved you guys, and I love her more than you" and they're like "Thanks, Dad." You know in the BCS top-ten ranking you're only gonna be number three in my life, you know my relationship with the Lord and then my wife and then you guys. That's it. They kind of act offended, but they're kind of comforted that they don't have to carry more than that. So there's a certain kind of ordering or priority. It doesn't mean you don't have those other relationships, but you keep them in order. So the big fault I think for the father figure in Saving Mr. Banks is that he's destructive, and he's not even aware that he is.

Darrell Bock Yeah that's the tragedy of it. It's taken him exactly the opposite direction than what he intends.

Chip Dickens Yep. I loved your statement earlier. The very thing he wants to protect he actually endangers, and you see this not only with the father figure but even with the mother. She actually gets rescued from her own destructive suicide attempt by her daughter, has to be the adult, and kids are just not equipped to be able to manage that stuff, at least not well. So when all the weight kind of hinges on kids, you're gonna get a wheel that kind of wobbles. You're gonna get a family that doesn't kind of function at an optimal level, whereas the family in Heaven For Real it's like those things are kind of in place, they're kind of in order. Just because those things are in place it doesn't somehow make them immune from pain and hurt and miscarriages, but you get to watch a family where those things are in place kind of survive and move through life, and it's beautiful. It's a cool picture.

Darrell Bock Yeah, and again coming back to Heaven Is For Real, I think it's unusual to see a movie portray such sweetness in the context of life because most movies are built around really intense conflict in which there has to be a really black, evil, and challenge that builds around a movie in order to make it go, and this movie—

Chip Dickens They did it without that.

Darrell Bock Yeah they did it without that. In that sense it was a very different kind of movie.
The Table Podcast Movies and Family

Tim Basselin One part of that is there's a lot of sexual tension in that movie between the husband and the wife and it goes to speaking about that relationship being very important, but it also goes to speak about the earthiness of the film and just those connections there.

Darrell Bock Yeah. It's interesting to mention. So obviously to me the father figure in Saving Mr. Banks is a reflection of where really a lot of people often are, that they intend well for their families, they intend well for their kids, but the way in which they choose to live and the life choices they make really with reference to themselves in some ways, almost having bracketed the kid off to the side, ends up refracting back on that child in ways that if you sat down and talked to them about it they'd go, "Well I never wanted that to happen." It really pictures what dysfunctional means in many ways.

Chip Dickens Yeah, in fact I love one of the scenes there at the end where Walt Disney shows up in London and is engendering the trust of the author, but then he says something about forgiveness and she immediately goes, "Well I've forgiven him", and you can see he's like "I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about forgiveness for you." You get the sense that these parental relationships aren't just dysfunctional in the moment between a parent and a child but there's this relationship that it impacts with ourself that has to be restored. It's really insightful for him. I don't know if that really happened in life, but it was a really cool piece for a psychologist to watch him say that to her and she kind of got caught off guard a little bit and then reconsider, "How do I feel about me?"

Darrell Bock Yeah. Well it says something for the depth of the writing in the film that they were able to pick this up and portray it so powerfully. Well let's talk about the impact on the families that are already broken. You don't even have the semblance of a family structure. You're just out there. Obviously they come in all shapes and sizes, but it shows the importance of family in the development of a person.

Chip Dickens And God's redemptive work may not always come from within a family, and so you can see with Saving Mr. Banks that there's these key other figures that almost become kind of surrogate -

Darrell Bock The chauffer.

Chip Dickens Yeah.
Darrell Bock

Yeah and what it means to us is that it's important to help people keep their eyes open for those possibilities in their life when their situation is that broken because I think sometimes we miss it. In the midst of all the operations that my mother was having even into high school I had a coach who came alongside and affirmed my involvement. I had an English teacher who did the same thing, and those two people who later I discovered were Christians, didn't know it at the time, absolutely didn't know it at the time, but when they found out that I had ended up in seminary it was like they contacted me, and it was like, wow.

I mean the hand of God stepping in, in effect, was a bleeding wound, really, really powerful. I think God does provide those opportunities if we'll keep our eyes out for them, and if the people in the church are willing to see and step into those opportunities when they exist because sometimes they're put out there on a plate for us, and if we're sensitive to it, then we can be of help and God can use us.
**The Table Podcast**  Movies and Family

**Chip Dickens**  Yeah, see, God can orchestrate those things and move people in ways that they could be His hands and feet, and they're not even aware of it, and then there's the great joy of those of us who are Christians who are eager to be used by God that we get to watch God use us and it's the best platform to worship is "God, would you use me in such a way and let me be attentive and willing and responsive to your leading?” --to be that kind of ministry in someone's life is really cool.

**Darrell Bock**  And those people literally can show up anywhere. They will never be filmed by Hollywood.

**Chip Dickens**  That's right.

**Darrell Bock**  They are the silent majority that we're talking about earlier. They are there, and this has been fun to work through these two movies, the two interesting films that I think do raise some very interesting life questions, show the value of art, show the importance of family, really deal with some core ideas, and we'll have to do this again sometime. This has been a fun effort. I really appreciate your willingness to do this with us.

**Chip Dickens**  Thanks for having us.

**Darrell Bock**  And we appreciate you joining us on the Table where we discuss issues of God and culture and hope that you'll be back with us again soon.