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EVEN IF YOU DO SUFFER Michael B. Beough
I Peter 3:13-18; I Corinthians 12:4-7 June 14, 2009
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Sometimes, movies get it right. And when they get it right, they can become messages from God. The movie *Simon Birch*, I think, gets it right. The reason it gets it right is because of the title character.

It is a story about a twelve year old boy in 1964 who irritates almost everyone. He happened to be born with a genetic syndrome that results in a weak heart and stunted growth. At age twelve, he is half the size or less of normal 12 year olds and has a rather squeaky voice when excited.

It seems that the most irritating thing about him for some is that he believes God has a plan for his life. He believes God has chosen him to be an instrument to accomplish some heroic deed. For me, this is the central question that this movie raises, "Do I believe God has a plan for my life? Do I see myself as an instrument of God's will and purpose?" And, furthermore, "Do I have the faith to hold on to that belief even if I do suffer?"

Let me introduce you to Simon Birch. In this scene, he gets in trouble for speaking out in church. Then he gets scolded by his Sunday School teacher, Miss Leavey. She calls Simon's belief in God's plan for his life as "nonsense."

(Show clip #1)

Don't you just want to strangle Miss Leavey? And Reverend Russell needs a good talking to.

One of the toughest things every human has to do from birth is to figure out where he or she belongs. You can't live a truly human life in the way God intends if you are always an outsider. You have to belong somewhere. If you are different, then others can make that task terribly hard to accomplish. Just ask any junior high school student or high school student. We are all driven by this need to belong. It is such a strong drive that we too often compromise our principles and values to fit in.

But not Simon. Even though he suffers from rejection by those who should know better, he refuses to believe that his life has no meaning and purpose.

In this next scene, he is in trouble again, this time for causing the Christmas pageant to end in chaos. Reverend Russell says it is the first time in the history of the church that the Christmas pageant became a full contact sport. Simon begs Reverend Russell to assure him that God has a plan for his life.

(Show clip#2)

How would you answer Simon or anyone who wants to know if God has a plan for his or her life? Reverend Russell says he can't tell Simon that. We learn later that Father Russell has his own issues he is dealing with. He has lost a sense of God's guiding hand in his own life because of something he has done that leaves him loaded with guilt and shame. You will have to watch the movie to find out what that is.

The good news is that in the end Simon does not let Reverend Russell's doubt undermine his faith.

Simon becomes the hero he thought God wanted him to be. He discovers why God made him so small. He helps rescue a group of thirteen 3rd graders from a bus that has gone off the road into a lake. The bus is returning home from a weekend retreat over the Christmas holidays. The road through the woods is covered with snow. A deer steps out onto the road. The bus driver slams on the brakes and swerves to miss the deer. The bus goes over the side of the road and down a steep hill until it ends up in the lake below. The driver yells that he can't swim and abandons the children on the bus to save his own life. Reverend Russell gets knocked unconscious.

As the bus starts filling with water, panic sets in. The children are screaming and crying. Joe, Simon's best friend and also 12 years old, tries to get them quiet but to no avail. The camera zooms in on Simon's face. You can see in his eyes that he realizes this is his moment. He stands on a seat and with that high squeaky voice tells the children to get quiet. Immediately, they all turn and look at Simon. This is one of Simon's gifts. He knows he has the ability to get children to listen to him. He says it is because of his size. I Corinthians 12 says we all have certain gifts from God to be used for God's purposes. Simon takes charge and quietly tells the children that he will not let anything happen to any of them. He tells Joe to get in the water and then hands off each child. Joe takes them one by one to shore.

Simon has been counting and knows that one child is still on the bus. He searches and finds Stuart whose foot is caught between the bus seat and the wall. The water has risen up to the tops of the seats. Simon goes under water and frees the boy's foot. Then he lifts this last little boy, as big as he is, so the boy can climb through a window to get out of the sinking bus. Joe pulls the boy free from the outside and takes him to shore. Just then the bus lurches and sinks out of sight with Simon still on it. Joe yells Simon's name and starts swimming to the spot where the bus disappeared. Just as he gets there, Simon floats to the surface, still alive, but not doing well. They carry his little body to the shore and then to the hospital.

Joe visits his bedside. Simon now knows why God made him so small. God had a plan for his life, after all, and I can tell you that the

ending of the movie will make you cry. Like the outsider Jesus, who was rejected and despised and gave his life for us, little Simon dies in the hospital from exposure to the water, with his friend Joe by his side.

This brings me to I Peter 3:14. "But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed." I don't know about you, but I don't usually think of suffering and blessing in the same sentence. This is one of the hardest lessons of faith. So, in light of *Simon Birch*, I decided to interview the person responsible for these words. I found the Apostle Peter in his garage mending a fish net.

I introduced myself and told him about Simon Birch and how I needed some help with the idea that "if you suffer for doing right, you are blessed."

Peter's eyes blazed for just a moment. I had struck a nerve. "It's not just an idea," he said. "Or maybe that's all it is to you."

I knew Peter could be direct and volatile. At least, that's how he seemed to be in the Bible. Still, I wasn't quite prepared to start defending myself at the start of the conversation. I told him I didn't mean it was just an idea. I wanted to know how we can find the courage to do the right thing when we know it will include suffering, even death.

Peter kept blazing at me and said, "You tell me."

I shook my head. "That's my problem. I am not sure I can. I admire people like Simon Birch, but" I hesitated.

Peter seemed to relax a little and said, "But you don't believe it, about the blessings."

I shook my head again and said, "I want to believe it."

"I was like you at the beginning," Peter said. "I did everything I could to keep Jesus from going to Jerusalem and suffering there. It was because I didn't want to suffer. Who does? He even called me Satan once."

I said, "Ouch!"

Peter seemed to blush a little. "Suffering was not in my plans, but I have come a long way since then. I don't think suffering should be in any of our plans, but what I now know is that **if you do the right thing, if you give your life to our Lord and follow him and do his will, it does not make your life easier or safer or less stressful.** You will suffer, you will be inconvenienced, it will cost you in more ways than one, but you will receive the blessing of our Father in Heaven in ways you never imagined before." Peter's face lit up. "There is nothing quite like seeing another person's life change because they caught a case of Jesus-fever from you.

There is nothing quite like seeing God's plan and purpose at work in your life. There is nothing quite like experiencing the joy of our Father's love when we know we have done the right thing. Like Simon says in the movie, 'All of us need a father.' By the way, I like that name Simon."

I looked surprised. "So you have seen the movie?"

Peter said, "I get around. Here is what I thought of at the end. Our lives are like fish nets. You can just hang it on a wall and try to keep it looking pretty. Or you can throw it out into God's wide world and try to catch something. It might snag and tear. It might grow heavy with the weight of the catch. But at the end of the day, you know you have done something that counts. You know that God had a plan for your life and you did it. You did it. You did it." He looked at me like a coach sending me into the game, "Son, you need to get your net off the wall and start fishing."

I left Peter in his garage. I realized he had given me a clue to the life of Simon Birch and to the life of faith.

Simon kept throwing his net out into God's wide world. He became a hero by saving the children. But that is not the only heroic thing he accomplished. He became God's instrument for helping his best friend Joe find faith. At the beginning of the movie, a grown up Joe as an adult visits Simon's grave.

As narrator of the film, Joe says Simon is the reason he has faith in God. "He is the reason I believe in God. The faith I have I owe to Simon Birch. It is Simon who made me a believer."

(Show clip #3)

And I leave it to you. If you pray for me, I will pray for you. Do the right thing, no matter what. Life is just too short to do anything else.

Next week we will review the movie *The Shaggy Dog*, a special Father's Day presentation on Friday at the Movies. I will share with you my interview with Jacob, the father of 12 sons.

I still have regrets for denying three times as they led him off to die. Some friend I was! I was afraid. Terrified.

What you're telling me is that you have never suffered because of your faith in Jesus Christ."

I said, "Well, I give a lot of money to the church."

He said, "Look, if you keep playing it safe, you will never know the blessings I am talking about in my first letter. Playing it safe is about the dullest life you can live. And the most dishonest. If you truly believe in Jesus Christ as the Lord and Savior of your life and if you truly believe he is worth knowing, then there is nothing that will stop you from making it known to others.

I could have told those Christians in my first letter to

Our Core Message is Peace, Purpose, Promise. We believe God has a purpose for our lives. We find that purpose by following Jesus Christ.