

A Better Life (2011)

Rated PG-13. Our Ratings: V -4; L -1 ; S/N -1. Running time: 1 hour 38 min.

*For the needy shall not always be forgotten,
nor the hope of the poor perish forever.*

Psalms 9:18

Listen, children, to a father's instruction, and be attentive, that you may gain insight; for I give you good precepts: do not forsake my teaching.

When I was a son with my father, tender, and my mother's favorite, he taught me, and said to me, "Let your heart hold fast my words; keep my commandments, and live.

Proverbs 4:1-4

Director Chris Weitz's film fits Carlos and his son Luis ride into two great categories, then L.A. in a desperate search. first and most obvious being the immigrant experience in America, and the second that of father and son. In either case this compelling film belongs at or near the top of the list. With little reliance upon the usual cinematic techniques to affect our emotions this film depicts the heart-rending tale of a father's determination to provide for his somewhat rebellious and unappreciative son a better life than he had known in Mexico.

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Carlos Galindo (Demian Bichir) is an assistant gardener who works for Blasco (Joaquin Cosio). He and his teenage son Luis

(Jose Julian) live in a tiny house in a Los Angeles barrio. As he reveals late in the film, his wife had run away because his small salary could not provide all the things she wanted. He struggles to provide what his son needs, even giving him the only bedroom while he sleeps on the couch. Luis is smart and being courted at school by a gang. He seldom communicates with the father whom he regards as a strict moralist and far too tight with money.

Blasco keeps badgering Carlos about buying his truck and equipment before he retires and returns to his home country. Carlos resists because he does not have a driver's license. He knows that owning the rig is the best way of improving his economic situation, but he also knows that just one stop by the police could unveil his illegal immigrant status and send him back to Mexico. Blasco tells him that he must decide soon or he will sell the rig and business to the highest bidder.

Carlos decides to take the risk and goes to his married sister Anita (Delores Heredia) who is more prosperous. She hesitates, but decides to sneak the money out of the family savings account, her husband never having paid much attention before to her banking. It is a proud day when Carlos, no longer in the passenger seat, drives up to the corner where he had once stood among the laborers desperate for a job. Now he is the one doing the hiring. He chooses an older man named Santiago. A bad choice, because when Carlos empties his pockets to climb a tall tree in need of pruning, Santiago takes the keys, runs to the truck, and drives off. Carlos hurries down, chasing after the truck, but to no avail.

Carlos is heart-stricken, not only for himself, but also for his sister who had trusted him at such great risk. When he breaks the news to Luis, the boy insists on accompanying him the next day to look for the thief. They dare not go to the police because of the father's illegal status, something the thief had counted on. Nonetheless, through a roundabout means they learn the robber's identity and where he works. At the

restaurant they learn that it is several hours until the thief's night shift begins, so the two have a lot of hours to spend together—they have had to depend on busses to get about the sprawling metropolis, so there is no question of going back home to wait out the time.

Ironically, it is Carlos's bad luck that brings him and his son together. As they walk through the neighborhood around the restaurant they chance upon a Mexican celebration and rodeo. Growing up in L.A., Luis knows little about his father's country, so as they sit in the stands watching the brilliantly costumed female equestrians and the cowboys ride and wrangle steers, his father fills him in on the traditions and customs of their people. We assume that this is one of the longest times that they have spent together for many years. That night when they catch up with Santiago there is another plot development that lands father and son into even greater difficulty, the film ending on an ambiguous note of sorrow and yet also of dogged hope.

A Better Life is to be added to such fine films as *El Norte*, *Bread and Roses*, *Mi Familia*, and *Sin Nombre* for informing us of the lot of those whom so many regard as just a threat or "a problem." Carlos shares with all parents the desire to provide a better life for his son, a desire all the more poignant when we see the terrible obstacles he faces. Never sinking into self-pity, he exhibits the quiet dignity that few of the well-off employers recognize or honor. The sequence in which he and his son bond is beautifully dramatized in an understated way, making what follows (which we fear all along is inevitable in such an honest film) all the more heart wrenching. We read many times in the Psalms and the prophets of the God who hears and answers the cries of the oppressed. The film's slightly upbeat ending leads us to hope that the cry of this family will be answered, that the promise of the psalmist will be kept.

Note: Discussion questions are available with this review for

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