

# Escobar: Paradise Lost (2014)

Rated R. Running time: 2 hours.

Our content ratings (1-10); Violence 6; Language 3; Sex/Nudity 4.

Our star rating (1-5): 4

*Ah, you who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!*

*Isaiah 5:20*

*Guard me, O Lord, from the hands of the wicked; protect me from the violent who have planned my downfall. The arrogant have hidden a trap for me, and with cords they have spread a net, along the road they have set snares for me.*

*Psalms 140:4-5*

*What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?*

*Luke 9:25*

Director/writer Andrea Di Stefano explores the many sides of a person who has wrought extensive evil throughout Columbia, the United States, and, indeed, the world—Pablo Escobar. The “Paradise” of the title that is lost is sought by two Canadian brothers. Nick (Josh Hutcherson) and his older brother Dylan (Brady Corbet) have come in 1983 with Dylan’s wife and a few others to build their paradise on a picturesque beach near Medellín, Colombia. Both expert surfers, they plan to start by teaching surfing and then opening an establishment that will include a bar and restaurant on what they are told is an un-owned beachfront strip of land.

One day in town Nick spots a lovely young woman, Maria (Claudia Traisac) overseeing a delivery by several men. He asks to rent her truck, and she responds that she will not rent it, but he can use it for free. He sees her again at the dedication of a medical clinic for the villagers. He also sees Pablo Escobar (Benicio del Toro) for the first time, standing on a platform before a towering portrait of himself. The man speaks of his own humble background and of the good that the new clinic will bring and the hope that the people will be able to better their lives. Nick strikes up a relationship with Maria that quickly escalates into their mutual desire to marry, this despite the revelation that Escobar is the uncle who regards the girl as a daughter. Although he does not say it, naïve Nick does seem to be aware of the stories about the so-called benefactor's drug dealings.

Nick is easily won over by Escobar's warm welcome when he and Maria attend her uncle's lavish birthday celebration at his hacienda, which is the size of a small college campus—it even has a small zoo boasting an elephant. Surrounded by hundreds of family members, hired thugs, and officials, Escobar is the epitome of a welcoming host. We also see him as a devoted husband and father. He frolics in the large swimming pool with his young children. He publically announces Maria and Nick's engagement, embracing and blessing them.

Maria is somewhat aware of her beloved guardian's drug business, but she refers to it as "exporting a product," as if drugs were on the same level as coffee or copper. Brother Dylan is less circumspect, upset by Nick's new connection with the drug lord, even warning him of the consequences. Nick, not heeding his brother at first, is thrust quickly into reality when he learns what happened to the local thugs who had beat up him and Dylan as part of their scheme to extort money from them for using "their territory" for their beach camp and future business site. Escobar had learned of this when he had asked Nick how he came by some bruises. Nick hears that the

gang had been rounded up, hung upside down together from a tree and burned alive, the aftermath a grizzly sight that we see in a flashback.

The whole central story is told in a long flashback, the film beginning in the summer of 1991 with Nick being one of a small group of men, each entrusted with driving a van of treasures that Escobar plans to hide in caves and such around the country. He has entered into a bargain with the federal government to end the bloody civil war that has been wreaking such havoc in Columbia for so many years. For a reduced sentence he agrees to call off his followers from their slaughtering. His imprisonment will be in a special facility from which he can still direct his activities.

In private Escobar gives Nick instructions on where to go and what to do when he arrives—orders that include the killing of the peasant who will guide him to the cave where the boxes will be hidden. Nick hides his revulsion at being required to kill, but on the way is obviously bothered by this last order. Especially when arriving at the village he discovers that his guide is a cheerful teenaged father, he is conscience stricken. What to do, especially knowing that failure to carry out orders might result in his own death. Indeed, when he spots one of Escobar's high-ranking assassins, he wonders if he also is to die in order to keep secret the whereabouts of the treasure.

The film is a riveting portrait of the human face of evil, with actor Benicio del Toro dominating the film. We see enough of

Escobar's family life to see how warm and caring he can be, and from shots of dozens of murdered people we see how brutal he can be. He is also a religious man, praying over the telephone with his mother that God will protect them—but obviously sees no connection between God and morality. When he arrives to turn himself over the authorities we see catch a

glimpse of how he has become regarded by millions of poor Columbians as a Robin Hood.

He orders his henchmen to get out of the car, surrounded by thousands of cheering people, and give them "a little money." Also, we see how his generosity to the Catholic Church, along with his building of so many clinics, sports facilities, and other facilities for the poor, that has gained him its support. A priest blesses him, praying that God will keep an eye on him. To this Escobar gives to the priest his own blessing and says that he will get a big telescope, train it on the heavens and keep "an eye on God."

Juxtaposed to this large-scale scene is the smaller one in a far away village where Nick is discovering the high price of getting into bed with the devil. His crisis of conscience has brought him to the brink of terror and despair, but can he do anything to counter his orders? He has already lost paradise. Will he also lose Maria—and his soul?

*This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the August issue of Visual Parables. A subscription to the journal will also give you access to Lectionary Links, a feature for preachers that links a film to one or more lessons from the Common Lectionary.*