

Hope Bridge (2015)

Rated PG-13. Running time: Not available, under 2 hours.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 5; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 2.

Our star rating (1-5): 4

...where then is my hope? Who will see my hope?

Job 17:15

And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Romans 5:3-5

Director Joshua Overbay's independent film has been called a "Christian film," but unlike others in that genre there is no mention of Jesus Christ or the church. My usual complaint about such movies—that they lack subtlety, their producers wanting to grab viewers by their lapels and convert them—does not apply to this film dealing sensitively with a teenager deeply troubled when he discovers that his recently deceased musician father died by his own hand.

In present day Kentucky 15 year-old Jackson's (Booboo Stewart) mother Robin (Sam Sorbo mother) is so worried about his behavior that she decides he needs counseling. However, because they do not seem to belong to a church, she takes him to a therapist, Eric (Kevin Sorbo)—there are no last names or professional titles in this film. Jackson is not eager to open up to a counselor, but Eric is personable, exhibiting genuine

concern that moves beyond professionalism. At one point he tells the despondent boy, "Your life is not pointless. You have people who love you. Who need you." Jackson is fearful that, being the son of a suicide, he too might follow in his father's footsteps, so Eric says, "Your life has a purpose. Your story is important. Your dreams count. Your voice matters. You were born to make an impact."

Part of the treatment program involves the clients sitting in a circle with other troubled souls and sharing their stories. One of them is Sophie (Rebeca Robles), a girl a little older than Jackson. She not only takes a liking to him but also has a car that she is willing to drive around as Jackson runs down clues to people who had known his father. Eric cautions Jackson, saying that he should be sure of what he is doing, that he might not like what he discovers. One of those discoveries is that he has a grandmother named Lana (Tantoo Cardinal) down in Tennessee. Sophia obligingly agrees to drive him there, asking in return that he accompany her when she goes to reconcile with an aunt from whom she had stolen something. Lana is pleased to meet her grandson, but reveals something about his grandfather that adds to the boy's depression. For a dark period Jackson seems to sink beyond all help, until...

This film about suicide reminds me of one released 50 years ago, a Sidney Poitier film named *The Slender Thread*. Detailing the efforts of a crisis center telephone volunteer to seek help for a woman who has called to report that she has taken an overdose of pills on purpose, it relied more on suspense than the current film. Would Poitier's character be able to coax from her the information so that a team of medics could find her in time? There is intense suspense toward the end of *Hope Bridge* when Jackson drives out to the bridge that gives this film its title, but the suspense does not run throughout its length. This is more of a study of a teenager seeking to understand the motives of his dead father, his quest fraught

with the fear that it might reveal that he is doomed to the same fate.

With little or no budget for promotion, this film played for but a brief time in Cincinnati. This is unfortunate in that it is a fine coming to oneself film that church youth groups would do well to see and discuss. So many teenagers go through periods of depression and consider doing themselves in that watching and discussing the film could be of help. There are no altar calls or conversions offered, no "Jesus is the Answer" bromides, just the affirmation that there are caring adults who can be a "bridge of hope" for those seeing only uncrossable chasms in their lives. The good news is that it is being released on DVD on May 26.

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the June 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.