

Prisoners

Rated R. Our ratings: V -7; L -6; S/N -1. Running time: 2 hours 33 min.

Do not say, 'I will repay evil'; wait for the Lord, and he will help you.

Proverbs 20.22

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12.21

French-Canadian director Denis Villeneuve and screenwriter Aaron Guzikowski's mystery thriller explores the ins and outs of a parent's worst nightmare, the kidnapping of a child. And unlike the action thriller *Taken*, also about a kidnapping (of an adult child), the fathers in this movie are not former secret agents with almost super human powers and knowledge, but just two ordinary guys stretched to the limit of human endurance. The film's believability factor adds to the tension and suspense that never lets up. We see immediately that Keller Dover (Hugh Jackman) will be the focus of the story because the film opens with him and his 14-year-old son Ralph (Dylan Minnette) in their hunting gear watching a buck deer feed nearby. The boy takes careful aim, fires, and the deer drops. Keller expresses his pride at the boy's first kill, a clean shot.

On the way home he tells Ralph the best advice he received from his father was always to "be ready." We see that he has followed that advice by stocking their basement with stacks of prepared food, water jugs, and even gas masks. He does not seem to be one of the rabid type of survivalist, but he is ready "just in case" of a breakdown in society. This advice which he has followed and passes on to his son will add to our

understanding of his deeds in the dark events that will follow.

Keller and Franklin Birch (Terrence Howard), lifelong friends, are both married and live just a short walk from each other in a Pennsylvania suburban development. On Thanksgiving Day Keller, wife Grace (Maria Bello), Ralph, and six-year-old Anna (Erin Gerasimovich) walk to the Birch's home. Grace and Nancy Birch (Viola Davis) are also good friends, as are teenaged Eliza Birch (Zoe Soul) and 6-year-old Joy (Kyla-Drew Simmons) pals with their Dover counterparts. After dinner the parents enjoy conversing while the teenagers watch TV, and the two girls play together. Outside at one point they climb onto the rear bumper of a small rundown RV parked down the street, with the worried parents pulling them off. Then the girls decide to go to the Dover house in search of some toys. It is several hours later before the parents miss the girls and rush frantically through the neighborhood calling for the pair.

Their search is fruitless, and so Detective Loki (Jake Gyllenhaal) is called in. It is telling that he is reached at a restaurant where he is eating alone—and this is Thanksgiving Day. He methodically runs down clues that lead him to the camper and its driver Alex Jones (Paul Dano). Alex confirms Loki and Keller's suspicion by trying to run away. However, forensics finds no evidence that the girls had been in the camper, and Alex turns out to be so mentally handicapped that he does not seem to comprehend matters when Det. Loki interrogates him. The officer pleads with his superior that the suspect be held beyond the legal 48-hour limit, but the man is let go anyway, returning to his Aunt Holly Jones (Melissa Leo) who cares for him. Not knowing of the detective's objection to Alex's release, Keller is angry with Loki, accusing him of letting the only suspect go, and that he is doing nothing, despite the latter's promise to Grace, "I will find your child!"

The two wives do not hold up well in the crisis, Grace sinking

into oblivion with alcohol and pills that send her to her bed. She totally neglects family and house, and therefore is unaware of Keller's frequent absences. Frustrated that the days are slipping away with no contact from the kidnappers, which means that the girls will probably be killed, Keller crosses the line by becoming a kidnapper himself. He seizes Alex and takes him to an abandoned apartment complex where he beats him while demanding to know where the girls are being held. His assumption that Alex was faking his confusion and would soon buckle is not borne out.

Frustrated, Keller takes Franklin with him to continue his tortuous interrogation of Alex. Franklin is horrified at the brutality of his friend, but when he questions their captive and gets nowhere in obtaining information from him, he does not stop his friend from resuming the beatings. Alex continues to claim he did not kidnap the girls. Meanwhile Det. Loki keeps pushing what seems to be a fruitless search, one that includes some false leads such as a pursuit of a suspiciously acting hooded figure attending a candle light vigil for the girls, and even a child abusing priest. The suspense and fear persist right up to the bizarre ending that left the screening audience gasping out loud.

Unlike most thrillers, this one does not neatly wrap everything at the conclusion. It leaves viewers thinking not only about the fate of its characters (Keller especially), but also about their moral/ethical acts. What would you do if you had the man suspected of abducting your child in your power? Would you use "any means necessary" to extract information from him? Would the possibility that you might be wrong restrain you? And if you were Franklin (or his wife Nancy who learns what their husbands are up to), would you go along, even though you are repulsed by what your friend is doing to the helpless captive?

The complex plot requires close observation and the torture scenes raises the moral question of crossing over the line in

the pursuit of truth and justice similar in a way to that of *Zero Dark Thirty*, or to a much older film about vigilantism *The Ox-Bow Incident*. Keller is portrayed as a religious man, the film beginning with his saying The Lord's Prayer while he and his son are observing the deer—admittedly an unusual time to say such a prayer. Later he again recites the prayer, but because of what has happened, and what he is doing, stops at "...and forgive us..." The violence makes this film problematic for some, but for those who appreciate a film with the main characters well developed and morally challenging, this long film is well worth the extra time required.

The full review with a set of 9 questions for reflection or discussion will appear in the November issue of Visual Parables, which will be available toward the end of October. If you are a subscriber and plan to discuss this film with a group, contact the editor, and he can send you the full review.