

World Trade Center (2006)

Rated PG-13. Our ratings: V-2 ; L – 3 ; S-1; Running time: 2 hours 5 min.

There are many who say, 'O that we might see some good!

Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord!'

You have put gladness in my heart

more than when their grain and wine abound.

Psalm 4:6-7

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil.

For if they fall, one will lift up the other;

but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him,

who are called according to his purpose.

Romans 8:28

While millions of us watched in shock and disbelief the burning twin towers on our TV sets, the rescue teams and emergency room personnel in New York City were preparing for a busy time of attending to the survivors of the falling towers. Most of the doctors and nurses had little to do that day. Only 20 survivors were brought out of the site alive. This is the story of two of them, and of those who anxiously stood by during the hours when their loved ones' fate was unknown—and of some of the brave men who risked their lives to see that they would be extricated from the dangerous pile of rubble and twisted pipes and wires above them.

Oliver Stone directs first-time screenwriter Andrea Berloff's script, which was based on the accounts given by those most closely involved, John and Donna McLoughlin and Will and Allison Jimeno. Sergeant John McLoughlin (Nicholas Cage) was a veteran Port Authority Police officer who had been stationed at the World Trade Center and helped rescue people from the 1993 blast and fire. Over the years he helped perfect the rescue equipment and procedures before moving on to his position at the Port Authority Bus Terminal. So, when the planes hit the Towers, he was asked to lead a five-member team to the Towers because of his knowledge of the equipment and of the buildings. All are in awe when they leave their bus and stare up at one of the burning towers, and then horror engulfs them as they see a body plunge toward the street.

Inside John makes his assignments, they gather the equipment, but the men have barely begun to follow John when the building shakes, accompanied by an earthquake-like rumble. John, knowing that the elevator shafts are the strongest sections of the building, yells at them to run toward the elevators. Chaos ensues, the men plunging beneath the concourse level, all but three of them killed by the falling debris.

John is buried up to his shoulders at the lowest level, and Patrolman Will Jimeno above him, pinned down by a large slab of concrete. Patrolman Dominick Pezzulo (Jay Hernandez) manages to extricate himself and struggles to free Will, but is unable, crying in his frustration. Then the collapse of the second tower kills him, the exact circumstances being unclear because the shot of his actual death was edited out at the request of Mrs. Pezzulo (an example of how closely the filmmakers worked with and strove to honor the feelings and wishes of the men's loved ones). New fires kept breaking out, threatening to burn the men alive. Over the next twelve hours John and Will, who could not see each other, kept each other from going to sleep, and thus dying, by talking about their families and work, encouraging each other not to give up.

Above ground we see the families, at first confident about their loved ones because they had been stationed at the Port Authority Bus Terminal. Their fear is barely kept in check when they learn that their husbands had gone into one of the towers. Their families gather around them and try to bolster their faith. Up in Connecticut Marine Reserves officer David Karnes (Michael Shannon) sits in a church pew with his pastor and says that he feels that God is calling him to a special mission to go and help at the Twin Towers. Wearing his uniform, he is able to pass through the line of policemen cordoning off the area. Darkness falls, and the firemen withdraw because of the danger, but Karnes keeps walking through the wreckage, calling out and listening. He is joined by another Marine, who had brought a flashlight, and the two of them continue searching, eventually hearing the banging of a water pipe, caused when, twenty feet beneath them, Will pulls it down to drink a few drops of water that accumulate in it.

Summoning the professional rescuers, the Marines stand by, the trapped men's ordeal far from over. There is barely room for a rescuer to crawl down, first to Will, who must be taken out before they can get to John. Just how dangerous this is, with the tons of unstable wreckage ready to fall again, we see when the first rescuer gives his colleagues his name and how to contact his wife before he wriggles into the hole. Will, afraid that he will be the cause of another's death, tells them to cut off his leg when they are unable to lift the slab pinning him down. They refuse and keep on trying. Thus even the rescue sequence of the film is one of intense suspense.

Stone shows admirable restraint in depicting the horror of the event. His indirection is best shown in two contrasting scenes on the subway. At the beginning the trains are filled with commuters going to work in Manhattan. The next day we see that same train, almost empty of passengers—just as effective as showing the actual deaths. Like United 93, World Trade Center

is not an easy film to watch, knowing so much more than its characters do of the fate that awaits them, but it can provide a healing balm for those who wonder where God was on that awful day.

For Reflection/Discussion

1) How do you think that the filmmakers' decision to focus in on just two families of the 9-11 victims was the right one? Compare this to such disaster films as *The Towering Inferno* or *The Poseidon*. In what ways do you see that the film honors rather than exploits the tragedy? How is the inclusion of a brief clip from Pres. Bush's speech an example of the filmmakers' nonpolitical approach? (In other words, what footage of the President would Michael Moore probably have used?)

2) How does the film illustrate again the wisdom of John Donne's "No man is an island..." or of the Ecclesiastes passage?

3) How is light an important element in the film? Do you think there is more to John's call to Will, "Do you see the light?" than he might have realized? Think how light is often a symbol in the Scriptures.

4) How does Will's deep Catholic faith enhance his will to live? How is the image of Jesus that he sees a very Catholic one? What is it that Jesus is holding? How might a psychologist explain that?

5) What do you think of the comment, by David Karnes I think, "It's like God made a curtain with the smoke, shielding us from what we're not yet ready to see."? Where does he get his imagery? (See Exodus 19:16-18.)

6) The events of 9-11 were triggered by a deep, religiously inspired hatred, as was shown in the film *United 93*, and yet how many times in this, and the other film, do you see expressions of love?

7) What do you think of the theological implications of John McLoughlin's observation that 9-11 brought out what humans are capable of—the evil, yes, but the good also? How can we see the film as a vindication of the apostle Paul's statement to the Romans? (Note that the RSV phrasing is used, rather than the NRSV, our usual version quoted.)