

John Piper Offers Reasons Why 'Selma' Movie Matters Today

The recent movie *Selma* tells the story of the civil rights efforts to gain the right of unencumbered voting for blacks in Alabama. As the movie begins, the raw juxtaposition of Martin Luther King Jr.'s receiving the Nobel Peace Prize and the deaths of four black girls in the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church of Birmingham, Alabama, sets the stage for the battle between King's philosophy of non-violence, and the brutal response of Sheriff James Clark. The movie covers the Selma events of February-March, 1965.

One of the reasons that the events of *Selma* are worthy of special attention is that they give insight into how local events became a national crisis, involving the president of the United States and the emergence of the Federal Voting Rights Act, signed into law by Lyndon Johnson on Aug. 6, 1965.

Why does this story matter today? Here are six answers.

1. This story is recent.

This year is the 50th anniversary of the events of Selma. Historically, that is recent. For example, I was 19 when these events were taking place. As I watched one young 19-year-old-looking man give the finger to the demonstrators in a 50-year-old real-time news clip in the movie, it struck me: I could be sitting beside that 69-year-old man in this very theater. And for all I know, his bitterness toward blacks could have intensified over the decades. Or he may be ashamed that his picture is forever captured as the symbol of white hatred.

Over 30 million people were born in the U.S. who are 10 years older and 5 years younger than I am. The vast majority of those are alive today. The events of Selma are living memories for them. How many of them were racists 50 years ago? How many

of them are still? Fifty years is not a long time.

2. The story illuminates structural racism.

In one illuminating scene Martin Luther King Jr. and colleagues are strategizing about how best to make progress in the right of blacks to vote. The conversation takes us into the labyrinth of racism underlying the denial of this right and how it creates other injustices. For example, white brutality against blacks, whether from the police or from the KKK or whomever, was seldom brought to justice. Why? All the juries were white. Why were all the juries white? Because you had to be registered to vote to serve on a jury. This is part of what is meant by structural racism. Of course, it is all rooted in the personal sin of racism in the heart. But once those hearts put enough processes and procedures and policies in place, the structures carry themselves forward.

3. The story is honest about King's moral failures.

In one painful moment, Coretta asks her husband, "Do you love me?" He answers, "Yes, I love you, Coretta." Then she asks, "Do you love the others?" After a long pause, King says, "No." She walks to another room. What makes her faithfulness to him the more remarkable is that this kind of threat to the marriage was on top of the "fog of death" that hovered over the family because of continual threats.

4. The story displays the power of non-violent resistance to injustice.

Three days after the world-attention-grabbing march from Selma to Montgomery, Martin Luther King Jr. was on NBC's *Meet the Press*. This 30-minute interview, preserved on YouTube, is a stunning follow-up to the movie. In it the real, historical King gives reasoned responses to fairly hostile questioning. In the process he articulates the philosophy of non-violent resistance:

There are two types of laws. One is a just law. One is an unjust law. I think we all have moral obligation to obey just laws. On the other hand, I think we have a moral obligation to disobey unjust laws, because non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. I think the distinction here is that when one breaks a law that his conscience tells him is unjust, he must do it openly, he must do it cheerfully, he must do it lovingly, he must do it civilly, not uncivilly, and he must do it with a willingness to accept the penalty. And any man that breaks a law that his conscience tells him is unjust and willingly accepts the penalty, by staying in jail in order to arouse the conscience of the community on the injustice of the law, is at that moment expressing the highest respect for law.

That is the deeper and larger drama that the movie displays.

The irony is that non-violent resistance elicits violent reactions. Three demonstrators were killed. Jimmy Lee Jackson was shot by State Trooper, James Fowler, on Feb. 18, after being tracked down into Mack's Café after a peaceful demonstration. On March 9 James Reeb, a Unitarian minister from Boston, and two other clergymen were beaten by white men armed with clubs. Reeb died two days later. Five hours after King's hope-filled speech in Montgomery, Viola Liuzzo, a white demonstrator from Detroit, was shot and killed by whites. The first two of these were depicted graphically in the movie.

Though King will trace the influence on his non-violent approach back through Gandhi to Socrates, there is no doubt that Jesus was the key influence.

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evil person. But whoever strikes you on your right cheek, turn to him the other as well. And if anyone sues you in a court of law and takes away your tunic, let him have your cloak also.

And whoever compels you to go a mile, go with him two" (Matt. 5:38-41).

And the apostle Paul gave the deeper rationale for such behavior:

"Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to God's wrath, for it is written: 'Vengeance is Mine. I will repay,' says the Lord. Therefore 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in doing so you will heap coals of fire on his head'" (Rom. 12:19-20).

5. The movie lets these religious roots shine through.

At one of his lowest points King calls singer Mahalia Jackson and says, "I need a word from the Lord." She sits on the edge of her bed and sings,

Precious Lord, take my hand
Lead me on, let me stand
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn
Through the storm, through the night
Lead me on to the light
Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home

Then when King and Ralph Abernathy are in jail together, King hits a new low, and Abernathy quotes the words of Jesus:

"Look at the birds of the air, for they do not sow, nor do they reap, nor gather into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much better than they?" (Matt. 6:26).

6. The story stirs up dreams of a life that counts.

This was the main impact on me. When I think about the needs

and sorrows and injustices of the world (thousands of peoples perishing unreached by the gospel, millions of babies killed in their mothers' wombs, global slavery and human trafficking, ethnic and racial hatreds around the world), the thought of an easy, comfortable, secure life of coasting to the end, feels overwhelmingly unattractive to me.

So I pray that this story of courage and sacrifice and conflicted righteousness will stir you and me to an unwavering commitment not to waste our lives.

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Related Resources

- Bloodlines: Race, Cross, and the Christian (book)
- From Bloodlines to Bloodline (sermon)
- Race and the Christian: An Evening with John Piper and Tim Keller, Moderated by Anthony Bradley (seminar)

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