

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Christopher Nolan's Interstellar

My wife and I recently visited our son, Jonathan, and his family in London, England, where they live. While there one evening we watched one of this year's important movies, Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar*. At one level it is merely a movie of science fiction, but at another level it is deeply metaphysical and profound. In this edition of *Issues*, I want to explore some of the themes developed in this unsettling movie.

To provide the context for analyzing the themes of this movie, it is important to summarize the nature of our Postmodern world. To use theologian Timothy Tennent's phrase, there is no longer a "canopy of meaning" in this Postmodern world, which has produced a deep cultural malaise that has left this generation suspicious about authority (with no transcendent God and no trusted political ruler), and lacking any confidence whatsoever in the possibility of truth. Thus, without God, revelation or any authority, culture is adrift, firmly anchored in midair. As Tennent observes, Postmodernity is only concerned with "imaginative and constructive descriptions of an infinite number of personal worlds." Therefore, in Postmodernity religion plays a new role, which, in the words of Peter Berger, means it is "privately meaningful and publicly irrelevant." As Tennent correctly argues, "The great task before this generation of Christian leaders is to reconstruct the great metanarrative for a postmodern world, and through that, proclaim anew the Pre-eminence of the Lord Jesus Christ! We must take advantage of their awakened consciousness to the power of story and narrative and tell a bigger story—the grand metanarrative of the redemptive story of God."

Nolan's *Interstellar* is an attempt to provide a metanarrative, with a clear redemptive theme. In the movie, earth is hit with an environmental catastrophe, which threatens the continuance of life on earth. Crop blight has produced damaging food shortages, incredible dust storms and wild fires throughout the world. Imminent extinction on earth is the new reality—a truth known only by NASA, which deliberately hides this truth. Professor Brand, the preeminent NASA scientist of the day, played by Michael Caine, recruits a father named Cooper, played by Matthew McConaughey, who is a former astronaut, engineer, now turned farmer, to lead an interstellar mission to save the human race from extinction. The first part of the plan is for the ship to carry 5,000 human eggs, enough to populate a planet as the new home for humanity. The other part of the plan is based on Professor Brand making a theoretical breakthrough that will permit humanity to break gravity's hold on earth so that all humanity can be transferred to their new home. He promises Cooper that he will complete his work by the time he returns from his mission. But Brand is knowingly lying because he knows Cooper will not lead the mission unless he can save his children and loved ones from extinction—and Brand's theory is

the key to that hope. To inspire Cooper and his team, Dr. Brand quotes the poet, Dylan Thomas: “Do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light.” Human survival is deeply personal but cannot survive without hope.

The major subtheme of the movie is the angry love of Cooper’s daughter, who deeply loves her father, but rages at his decision to leave—and that anger is perpetuated decade after decade through the movie. Time is another major subtheme of the movie—the time of quantum mechanics. The columnist David Brooks best summarizes this dimension of the movie: “When [Cooper] goes into space he leaves behind the rules of everyday life and enters the realm of quantum mechanics and relativity. Gravity becomes variable. It’s different on different planets. Space bends in on itself. The astronauts fly through a wormhole, a fold in the universe connecting one piece of space with another distant piece.” And in this quantum world time changes speed. In Cooper’s new world, time is moving more slowly than it is on Earth, with the result that he ends up younger than his daughter. At the movie’s end, he is in effect her descendant. Many have noted the religious symbolism of the movie: There are 12 apostles and there is a Noah’s Ark. Dr. Mann, played by Matt Damon, is a fallen angel who turns satanic in a seemingly promising new “Garden,” which it is not. The space project itself is called Lazarus and the heroine—Cooper’s daughter who in effect saves the world—is 33 years old. As Brooks writes, “There is [also] an infinitely greater and incorporeal intelligence offering merciful salvation [to humanity].” In this complex movie, love between father and daughter mixes with science and faith to produce a redemptive theme of salvation for the human race. But that “salvation” is in a fifth-dimension “tesseract” where humans have transcended the confines of space and time and have saved humans, including Cooper’s children—on “space stations that replicate small town life on earth.” As Peter Augustine Lawler has concluded, “The film doesn’t end with rage against ‘the dying of the light’ by particular persons. Time, death, and personal (especially familial) belonging [and love] remain essential features of what makes loving life worth living.”

A final subtheme of this remarkable movie is the concept of meaning. A meaningful life is about more than material success and it is more than a merely happy life. Meaning is about finding ways to serve others—in the case of the movie, even those yet unborn. Meaning is about giving of yourself for the sake of others—when you are serving more than just yourself.

Interstellar should drive us to the metanarrative detailed in the Bible. The human race is self-destructing, not because of some environmental catastrophe per se, but because of humanity’s declaration of independence from God. That declaration of independence has destroyed human relationships, warped the beauty of human love, and distorted all that is beautiful and good from the hand of our Creator. But the salvation of the human race is not to be found in outer space or in the complexities of quantum mechanics. It is found in the finished work of Jesus Christ, who offers true independence from the bondage to sin and self. The destiny of redeemed humanity is not a fifth-dimension “tesseract” but the New Heaven and New Earth, cleansed forever from the ravages of sin and rebellion. It is a promise that our Creator has made to us who have placed faith in His Son. He will rescue us; He will save us from the wrath to come (1 Thessalonians 5:9); and He will fulfill His promise to give us a glorified, resurrected

body that will forever be free of sin and its dastardly effects. That is the metanarrative that *Interstellar* hints at with its tantalizing symbolism. But it is the metanarrative detailed in the Bible that offers humanity real hope, and, unlike Dr. Brand who lied to get Cooper to go on his mission, God is not lying to us. He is a covenant-making, covenant-keeping God. He will keep His promises.

See David Brooks in the *New York Times* (24 November 2014 and 12 January 2015); Peter Augustine Lawler in *Intercollegiate Review* (Spring 2015), pp. 36-37; and Timothy C. Tennent, "Postmodernity, the Paradigm and the Pre-Eminence of Christ," *Evangelical Quarterly* 86:4 (2014), 291-302.