



Invictus

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Unexpected Weapons

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Film title: Invictus

Director: Clint Eastwood

Screenplay: Anthony Peckham, based on the book *Playing the Enemy* by John Carlin

Starring: Morgan Freeman, Matt Damon

Distributor: Warner Bros.

Cinema Release Date: 11 December 2009 (USA); 5 February 2010 (UK)

Certificate: PG-13 (USA); 12A (UK) Contains infrequent strong language

[Image]

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The sun rises over the townships of South Africa on 10th May 1994. And the question at the back of everybody's mind is posed aloud by the newsreader on the radio: "*Mandela can win an election. But can he run a country?*"

After years of racial conflict and oppression, the inauguration of South Africa's first black president was a moment of great celebration for many. But it was also, for some of the country's white population, a time for suspicion and resentment. How could one man bridge such a great divide? Was it possible that Mandela could even begin to reconcile a people torn apart by years of bitter hurt and hatred? The film *Invictus*, starring an Oscar-nominated Morgan Freeman as Nelson Mandela,

tells the story of this great leader and the unexpected weapons he used.

Rugby was, to the white South African, a source of both pride and humiliation. The green-and-gold strip of the national team, the Springboks, was revered by fans. But the 'Boks', captained by Francois Pienaar (Matt Damon), were in a hopeless state, apparently set for a series of crushing defeats at the upcoming world cup. More than this, they were loathed by black South Africans as a symbol of apartheid. But when the National Sports Council tried to rename the team and abolish their strip, Mandela himself intervened. "*If we take that away,*" he pointed out, "*we lose them [white South Africans]. We prove that we are what they feared us to be. We need to be better than that. We have to surprise them with compassion, restraint and generosity. All the things they denied us.*"

It was a move considered by many to be a betrayal of his race. But, as the film shows, it resulted in the unexpected uniting of black and white South Africans behind a team which was inspired to strive for greatness. Through his refusal to pay back what he had suffered at the hands of his oppressors, Mandela won the hearts of a nation. Though *Invictus* oversimplifies and exaggerates the scale of the reconciliation that the 1995 Rugby World Cup Final brought about, it was undoubtedly a moment when the world was impacted by the power of forgiveness.

The film encourages us to marvel at Mandela's ability to forgive despite everything he has gone through. "*I'm thinking about how you spend ten years in a tiny cell,*" says Francois, "*and come out ready to forgive the people who put you there.*" This president's real greatness lies in his grace, and as such he inevitably reminds us of another leader – a man who, even as he was being executed, cried out "*Father, forgive them.*" Forgiveness, for both of these men, was deeply costly. It went beyond what was 'reasonable' or 'fair' to make the unthinkable possible: to welcome as brothers and friends the very people who had rejected and abused them.

Invictus is careful to remind us that Mandela is a flawed human being with his own problems, not a saint. But he is a towering example of what it should look like when we really respond to

the greatest life of grace ever lived. To his very last breath, Jesus lived out his own teaching that we should love our enemies and do good to those who hate us (Luke 6:27). According to the Bible we are all responsible for what Jesus suffered, as though we ourselves had nailed him to the cross. We were God's enemies, but he hasn't treated us with the judgement we deserve. Instead he has reached out to us in love.

In the film, we see how Mandela's treatment of his enemies does not just amount to a passive refusal of revenge, but an active concern to know them and to care for them as individuals. It is this same kindness which God displays to us, and in the person of Jesus we see his amazing willingness to come down to our level and meet us even when we're still a long way off. In doing so, he grants us a dignity we don't deserve, and compels us to behave in the same way towards those who have wronged us. In looking at Jesus we see that grace is truly revolutionary, far stronger than political power or military might. As Mandela says: *"Forgiveness liberates the soul. It removes fear. That is why it is such a powerful weapon."*

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