



Bruce Almighty

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'We find it comfortable to imagine that most of what we experience in life is imposed from outside. This saves us from having to take responsibility for the way things are in the world. But to a large degree what happens in the world derives from choices that human beings have made. War and famine are not inevitable: they result from a long series of choices that people have made.'

(IVP)

We have all said it or at least thought it: 'God why do you hate me?' Although our expressions of helplessness in the face of suffering can be incredibly diverse, most of us have reacted to wretchedness in this kind of way. Those of us who know the heavy feel on our hearts of those questions know how difficult it can be to stop, to turn off the radio or the TV, and sit in silence thanking God for his goodness. Sometimes doing that seems ridiculously unimaginable.

Everything seems to be going well for Bruce Nolan (Jim Carrey), who is the central character in *Bruce Almighty*. His live-in nursery teacher girlfriend Grace (Jennifer Anniston) is positively drooling for a marriage proposal. Bruce has a job as a television reporter for Eyewitness News covering social interest stories. He also has a nice apartment, a sports car, a dog and is on the shortlist to land the anchorman position, which would mean a big promotion.

I'm So Angry!

Bruce: *'I'm not okay with a mediocre job, I'm not*

okay with a mediocre apartment and I'm not okay with a mediocre life.'

After seeing his team lose and his dog pee on the sofa, arriving late for work, losing his job, being beaten up and publicly humiliated, Bruce has had enough, and he returns home to tell Grace. Bruce is ready to explode. 'Thank God you are okay!', Grace exclaims sympathetically. Grace's assurance that some kind of providence is acting around Bruce is enough of a prompting for Bruce to turn his fury upon the Almighty. Bruce's accusing finger points at the King of Creation as he spits, 'God is like a mean kid on an anthill, burning ants with a magnifying glass. And I'm the ant.'

In Bruce's view, God is fairly boxed in. He is either in control of the world in which suffering exists, and is therefore bad. Or he is not in control - and not God. But, imagine that you had a view of your father that he would either give you everything you wanted whenever you asked, or that if he didn't then he is a bad father, and you can see the problem with this kind of view of God.

The next morning Bruce is woken up by his pager. It urges him to call a number but Bruce mutters, 'Sorry don't know you; wouldn't call you even if I did,' as he throws the pager out of the window. Eventually he responds and is led to the 'Omni Presents' building. Bruce is directed upstairs by a kindly cleaner who asks if he will help him clean the floor. Of course Bruce tells him that he is much too busy. When Bruce gets up to the top floor he meets the cleaner again who reveals that he is God. God gives Bruce all his powers along with a challenge to try and do better himself. But Bruce may not break the rules: he may not tell anyone what has happened and he may not mess around with free will.

Why Am I Significant?

God: *You've been doing a lot of complaining about me, Bruce . . . you think you can do it better, now here's your chance . . . when you leave this building you will be endowed with all my powers.*

Bruce uses his new powers to make sure that his rival, Evan Baxter, doesn't remain in the anchor job at Eyewitness News for long. He makes an utter fool out of Baxter live on air and uses his powers to guide himself to the best news stories at just the right times. Soon Bruce has the anchor

position and he begins to revel in the fame that comes with it. Finally, Bruce is taken seriously. It seems that by doing and dealing in the important side of life, Bruce hopes he will absorb value and importance himself.

The idea that Bruce could create for himself a meaning or an importance is basic existentialism. Bruce seems to have a conviction that this world is not the product of chance and that a relationship with God is possible. But he also thinks that he must work to create meaning and significance for himself. Bruce is so similar to so many people: they know that God is there -they aren't in any real doubt about that, but they are keeping him at arms length. He isn't the reference point for their own significance, nor the one they work hard to give glory to. It's a lip service religion and a self-service lifestyle.

Any meaning we create for ourselves, which is without a point of objective reference is relative. In the full picture, it is in very real danger of being ultimately meaningless. And yet we must somehow find a way to reconcile that with our desire to be ultimately meaningful, significant and of genuine value. Today's Hollywood fashionistas and starlets are discarded as tomorrow's has-beens, and the richest people in the world are often the unhappiest. Philosophy promised that in the scientific endeavour we would uncover the answers to the big questions of significance, but it has failed to deliver answers. Perhaps it is time to take another look at God, or at the human face of God - Jesus, and see if he can give us an answer to the question of what this world, this universe, and this existence really means? The Christian conviction is that only by doing so can we find answers to the questions of value and significance that we can use as sound foundations on which to build our lives.

Self-Control

'We live from our heart . . . how we live in the world now and in the future is, almost totally a result of what we have become in the depths of our being - in our spirit, will or heart. That is where we understand our world and interpret reality. From there we make our choices, act and react, try to change the world. We live from our depths - and we understand little of what is there.'

(IVP)

Bruce finds himself the centre of attention of fickle

socialites at a party. He sneaks off upstairs to call Grace to try and persuade her to come along too. As he puts down the phone Susan Ortega, his opposite number on the newdesk, who he has been playfully flirting with all the way through the story, then appears. Tempted and naïve, Bruce kisses Susan and at that exact moment Grace, who has had a change of mind about coming to the party, walks into the room.

In some ways you want to feel sorry for Bruce as Susan's approach was very forceful. But thinking back through the story you realise that Bruce hasn't had a momentary slip up, so much as he has been cultivating lust in his heart all along. One of the first things that he does with his powers is to indulge his hunger for lust by making the wind blow a woman's skirt up. Instead of choosing to have integrity in his working relationship with Susan, he goes giddy at the knees every time he sees her. Grace moves out the apartment and breaks up with Bruce, who is devastated.

A heavenly answer

Bruce Nolan: *How do you make someone love you without changing free will?*

'The greatest need you and I have, the greatest need of humanity in general, is renovation of our heart. That spiritual place within us from which outlook, choices and actions come has been formed by a world denying God. It must be transformed. Indeed, the only hope for humanity lies in the fact that, just as our spirit has been formed, so also it can be transformed.'

(IVP)

When Bruce thinks of God he probably isn't thinking of a father like mine. My dad allowed me to go to the doctor when I was younger, the doctor stuck a needle in my arm and it hurt! The needle also delivered various different vaccinations which was handy in hindsight, but didn't make sense at the time. Bruce doesn't understand suffering as being part of the biblical story. According to the Bible, the cause of suffering is located both in the fall of humanity through Adam, and in the personal moral failure that we each cook up in that laboratory of evil that is the human heart. We see the casualties of human rebellion in a world which once was good but now lies broken by violence, bitterness,

cancer, and AIDS.

And so Bruce meets God the cleaner and realises that he just can't be angry at God. It is no good pointing the finger at God and telling God to sort it out when he has already given us the ability to make a start. Bruce must become selfless and serve others. This is true for us all. We must be God's hands to the poor, and God's messengers and witnesses to the truth. We must fight passionately for social justice, for reform of trade rules that make the western world richer and the developing world poorer. But how is all this possible on limited human resources without having our hearts renovated, without having our very identity changed? How can we begin to have any confidence that we can resist the temptations that surround us in an erotica-obsessed culture without falling into a cold, puritan legalism that stifles our dreams and smothers our hopes?

But here we have God the cleaner: God the cleaner of the world, who first took upon himself on the cross our failure to be good people. Jesus paid for every dirty thought and every angry word with his death on a cross. He hung on the cross and died as the wrath of God for all human rebellion was placed upon him. The only way to have a relationship with God is to be born again. This is the way to a new identity and the significance for which Bruce Nolan was seeking. It is only through this new birth, and through this empowering, that we can resist the desires and lusts that we battle with. This allows our caring for others to be a sharing of the goodness that God has shown to us, rather than a striving to be right with God under our own steam as a result of the things we do.

Conclusion

Bruce comes to terms with the problems of life by coming to understand the role of human free will and his responsibility to use his freedom for the good of others. It's not a complete answer to the problem of evil and suffering, but it is an important part.

Bruce also recognises that submitting to God's will is vital not just for his own survival, but also for his own sanity. The rub is that God doesn't just want us to survive, or to just stay sane, he wants to give us significance and self-control as we walk

through each day with him having our minds are renewed by his word, the Bible.

Bruce does seem to find the sense of significance for which he longs. But it is not so much that his relationship with God leaves him with identity and meaning, as it is that he starts doing different things. This is part of showing a relationship with God, but it is not itself the relationship with God. The danger is that we confuse the doing with the knowing.