



Film: *Hotel Rwanda*



Introduction

No doubt you enjoy going to the movies for entertainment. A good story, well acted out and shot with skill, can make us forget almost completely about ourselves, our own problems, and our seemingly humdrum life. Almost everyone feels this way—and I write “feel” because movies deal more with emotions than ideas, with the heart rather than the intellect. Some movies, however, do more than entertain us. They introduce us to new ideas, lands, and people, and sometimes they even challenge us in our comfort and complacency. Such a film is *Hotel Rwanda*.

Competing against the usual adventure and comedy films so popular with cineplex audiences, the film fared better with the critics than with the public. Although not a huge box-office success, it is now available on DVD and in this format should reach a larger audience than during its run in theaters. It is exactly the kind of film that the church should be promoting. Its PG-13 rating allows it to be used with youth as well as adults. The filmmakers, wisely deciding not to concentrate on the bloody horror of genocide, instead focus on one man who rose above the hatred that gripped his fellow countrymen and risked his life to save others. He was not a born hero, preferring at first to play it safe and worry only about his own family, but circumstances forced him to broaden his horizons. Thus the film could be seen as the spiritual awakening or journey of a man.

During this class session we will watch just three clips from the two-hour-long film, but they should be enough to show us how an ordinary man rose to extraordinary heights of heroism. The example of Paul Rusesabagina can inspire us and plant the seed of heroism within us that someday, though in different circumstances, might spring forth. The film does not employ any God talk, but surely people of faith can see the God of justice and compassion underlying the actions of this simple man

who discovered unexpected courage when the occasion called for it.

Characters in the Clips

Paul Rusesabagina: Assistant manager of the Belgian-owned Hotel des Mille Collines in Kigali, the capital of Rwanda. He is a Hutu, married with several children.

Tatiana Rusesabagina: Paul’s wife is a Tutsi and thus worried for herself and her relatives because of the daily radio broadcasts spewing out hatred toward Tutsis.

Jack Daglish: An American television journalist whose camera captures scenes of the massacres.

Thomas Mirama: Tatiana’s brother, a Hutu.

Fedens Mirama: Thomas’s wife, also a Hutu, and mother of two children.

General Bizimungu: Head of the Rwandan army, and apparently behind the plot that killed the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi. He is well acquainted with Paul, who had done the general many favors.

Hutu Lieutenant: Leader of the squad of soldiers sent to round up Tutsis for execution. His sense of duty in no way conflicts with his desire for a bribe.

Scriptures Related to the Film



Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?”

Genesis 4:9

Why, O LORD, do you stand far off?

Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

In arrogance the wicked persecute the poor—

let them be caught in the schemes they have devised. . . .

They sit in ambush in the villages;

in hiding places they murder the innocent.

Their eyes stealthily watch for the helpless. . . .

Rise up, O LORD; O God, lift up your hand;

do not forget the oppressed.

Why do the wicked renounce God,

and say in their hearts, “You will not call us to account”?

But you do see! Indeed you note trouble and grief,

that you may take it into your hands;

the helpless commit themselves to you;

you have been the helper of the orphan.

Break the arm of the wicked and evildoers;

seek out their wickedness until you find none.

Psalms 10:1–2, 8, 12–15

A gift opens doors;

it gives access to the great.

Proverbs 18:16

Then the king will say to those at his right hand,
“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit
the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation
of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me
food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to
drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me . . .”

Matthew 25:34–35



The Film in Brief

The nations of the world said “Never again” after the horrors of the Nazi extermination camps were revealed to the world at the conclusion of WWII. And yet almost 40 years later, those nations stood by and allowed a murderous regime to stir its people up and slaughter almost a million of their neighbors. *Hotel Rwanda* tells part of the

story of the terrible slaughter of Tutsis by Hutus in the African nation of Rwanda during a horrible period in 1994. When he decided to direct the film, Terry George intended to do more than entertain you. He wanted to engage your heart and soul, to become so concerned for the characters in the movie that you would become disturbed enough to urge our government and the United Nations to stand up to criminal regimes such as that in present-day Sudan and command them to stop their killing.

The film centers on an assistant manager, Paul Rusesabagina (Don Cheadle), at the Belgian-owned Hotel des Mille Collines in Rwanda’s capital city of Kigali. Well-groomed and always wearing a suit and tie, Paul is the perfect host for guests, largely well-heeled European and American tourists. Paul is a “fixer,” a person who can find a hard-to-find bottle of fine wine or Cuban cigars for guests and the many government officials and military officers—the latter are important for the smooth operation of the hotel. Paul has done lots of favors for the military, which soon will prove crucial in saving more than 1,200 refugees who will flee to the safety of his hotel.

Paul is not the heroic type; his attention is focused totally on his career and his family. That rare Hutu free of anti-Tutsi prejudice, Paul has married the beautiful Tatiana, a Tutsi, and is on good terms with his in-laws and his Tutsi neighbors. Like small-town Americans, they all wave to one another when Paul returns home. However, Paul’s in-laws are fearful that the radio broadcasts heaping scorn and hatred upon Tutsi “cockroaches” will lead to disaster, so they try to warn Paul and convince him that they all should leave the country before violence erupts. Paul dismisses this as just rumor. He believes that the presence of the small U.N. force in his country and pressure from Western governments will deter the Hutu majority from carrying out their threats.

Then, just as the president of Rwanda has signed a treaty with the Tutsi rebels fighting against the government, his airplane is blown out of the sky, and the ominous order goes out on the Rwandan airwaves to cut down “the tall trees,” meaning the Tutsis. An orgy of violence and bloodshed sweeps through Kigali and the countryside, threatening to tear apart Paul’s family. The U.N. force is under orders not to interfere, just to protect the lives of the whites until they can be evacuated. Paul is left in charge when the white manager is called back

to Belgium. He has only his wits and the resources of the hotel to hold off the onslaught of killing within its compound. Suddenly he is forced to broaden his circle of concern to include well over a thousand Tutsis and moderate Hutus marked for death. It is a desperate situation to which this mild-mannered man rises in a magnificent way.

Some have compared Paul Rusesabagina with the German businessman Oskar Schindler. In Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List* we see how a high-living womanizer came to Nazi-occupied Poland to profit from Jewish slave labor and then, his conscience aroused by their brutal treatment by his fellow Nazis, schemed to save more than a thousand of them. Paul's spiritual journey is not nearly so great, he being a decent, educated African family man, but it was precisely his devotion to his family that he needed to grow beyond—which he did. By the end of the film we have been so drawn into Paul's journey that we too rejoice when he and those whom he has saved—1,268 according to the film—reach safety and no longer need fear the men with guns and machetes.



Engaging the Film

Chapter 3: “Soldiers in the Street”

1. Does Paul seem like much of a hero when you first meet him? What is his chief concern when he sees his neighbor Victor beaten and taken away by soldiers?
2. Can you blame Paul? If you saw someone being attacked in a dark parking lot or garage, what would you do? Especially if your going to the distressed person's aid meant endangering a family member with you, what might you do?
3. How is Tatiana a goad to his conscience? In what way has she developed spiritually more than her husband has? How far do you think we should go to help someone in danger?
4. What do you think of Paul's self-confidence when he tells Tatiana to leave things to those who know what to do? A typical male response? Keep this in mind when you see the next two scenes—how is his confidence misplaced?
5. Have you been in a situation in which someone else prodded your conscience to do the right thing? How

is it important that we surround ourselves with persons who are fair and just? When have you been such a prod for another?

Chapter 4: “What Makes a Tutsi?”

1. Hutu prejudice against Tutsis goes back many generations. What do you learn from the bar conversation about the animosity between the Hutus and the Tutsis?
2. What similar prejudices do we face in North America? Have we done much better in dealing with them; that is, are they still a problem in our society? What, if anything, are you and/or your church doing to combat racism and other forms of prejudice?
3. What do the two TV journalists make of the deep-seated prejudice of the Rwandans? Can they detect the differences between the two tribes? How do you think others have regarded our prejudices? How is humor often the best method for pointing out how ridiculous are what we regard as important differences?
4. How believable do you find the general's assurances to the press? Or his toast to Paul? Do you think he really backed his president—or was he part of the plot that led to the president's death? How does Paul seem in this scene? What might be going through his mind? What irony do you see in the filmmakers' showing Colonel Oliver saluting peace and the general's toast going on simultaneously?

Chapter 7: “Money For Cockroaches”

1. Why were the soldiers rounding up the Tutsis? What did they intend to do with them?
2. What does Paul do? Which apparently does the lieutenant believe in the most—his ideology that Tutsis are evil or his love of money? How is Paul able to use something “bad” to bring about good?
3. Note also the way in which Paul has to speak to the lieutenant. How is Paul's servile manner a result of one without power dealing with one who has it? Compare this with the way Paul deals with the hotel employees.
4. Whose life does Paul first “buy”? How is this the old Paul? But then what does Paul do? What could

he have done to play it safe? Do you think he could have lived with himself had he done so? (Especially with Tatiana?) Could you have “walked by on the other side”? (What does “the other side” refer to? See Luke 10:31–32.)

5. Describe what you understand to be Paul’s spiritual development or journey from what you have seen in these three scenes. Some might prefer to make a diagram of this. For those who have seen the entire film, how great is Paul’s development/journey?
6. What has been your journey through the years concerning your regard for others? How have you moved from the childish years of “Me, Myself, and I” to “Me and Family” to—? How have others played a role in your growth? Who were they? Have you thanked them—and God—for what they did for you?

What Next?

1. Check out one of the organizations that foster human rights. Make a donation to one or more to encourage their important work. The two best known are these:

Amnesty International (AI)

<http://www.amnesty.org>

Type the name of a country into their search field, and the titles of numerous articles appear. For example, for “Sudan” there at least ten articles about the alleged genocide in Darfur. AI issues an annual Human Rights Report that details the human rights situation nation by nation. (Yes, the United States sometimes is cited by AI for human rights violations.)

Human Rights Watch (HRW)

<http://www.hrw.org>

HRW also is a fountain of information on governmental and terrorist abuse around the world. It even sponsors an annual HRW International Film Festival.

2. Check out the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program. Its Web site includes information on situations such as Darfur and lots that Presbyterians can do (and are doing) to further justice and reconciliation. Send for one or more of the publications offered—some for free and others at a nominal cost.
3. If you like this film, you will also appreciate HBO’s *Sometimes in April*, which also centers on the Rwanda genocide. It is about a former Rwandan Army officer returning for the trial of his brother, accused of war crimes. Through a series of flashbacks we see that the two parted ways, one joining in the killing and the other leaving the country after a series of terrible experiences, including the murder of his wife and children. Issued on DVD, it might be available at your library (if not, most are eager to receive suggestions for DVD purchases). Set up a viewing and discussion of the film; if yours is a youth group, invite the rest of the congregation to come. Take up an offering (but not for admission!) and send it to one of the HR organizations or the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program.

About the Writer

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