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Some Thoughts about *The Kite Runner*

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The film version of *The Kite Runner*, now showing in theaters nationwide, is attracting considerable attention. Given the blockbuster sales of Khaled Hosseini's novel of the same title, that attention was quite predictable.

As a novel, *The Kite Runner* “works” at many levels. The plot is compelling, the characters are authentic, and the background context of Afghanistan before and after the coming of the brutal Taliban regime is both fascinating and horrifying. Both the novel and the movie divide the story into two major parts — one dealing with two young boys in Kabul as boys and the other dealing with the surviving boy as a young man with a troubled soul in America and back in Afghanistan.

The plot comes down to this: Two boys grow up in Afghanistan in a shared household. One, Amir, is the son of a wealthy and somewhat westernized businessman. The other boy, Hassan, is the son of the businessman's servant. Though clearly unequal in status, the boys are close. The boys are also talented at the Afghan game of kite running, involving boys chasing kites cut down by another kite in duels. Hassan has a great gift for knowing just where the kite will land.

The drama ensues when Amir betrays Hassan and Hassan falls victim to a gang of violent older boys who sexually assault him. Shortly thereafter, Amir and his father are forced to flee to America as the Taliban regime takes over the country. If anything, the film and the novel will serve to convince any fair-minded person of the awful brutality and terror of the Taliban.

The story turns on unfolding events as, several years later, Amir receives a phone call in California from an old family friend, revealing a stunning family secret and the fact that Hassan (now executed by the Taliban) has a son who is being kept as a sex slave by Taliban forces near Kabul.

The family friend, knowing of Amir's betrayal of Hassan, urges him to come and rescue the boy, promising, “There is a way to be good again.” The remainder of the film deals with Amir's return to Afghanistan, his rescue of the boy, Sohrab, and his adoption of the boy in the United States.

The book maintains a steady pace throughout both major sections. The film has difficulty doing so. In the movie version, the second half cannot compete with the first half for dramatic impact. Similarly, though the adult actors are very talented, they cannot compete with the brilliant performances of the Afghan boys, whose authenticity largely makes the movie.



Still, the movie is generally faithful to the book and, for that reason alone, is a moving story worthy of the big screen. The scenes of life in Afghanistan, especially the vivid color of the nation before the Taliban, are wonderful (and actually filmed in nearby regions of western China).

I had an opportunity to see the film in an advance media showing several weeks ago. The event included an open forum with the adult star of the movie, Khalid Abdalla, who plays the adult Amir. Abdalla is best known for his role as

Ziad Jarrah, the lead terrorist in the movie *UNITED 93*. At that time, the exact release date of the movie was not yet known, as threats against the child actors in Afghanistan had delayed the release. Some were eventually removed from the country for the own safety. That fact alone indicates something of the importance of the story.

The background worldview of the film and the novel is, of course, Islam. Given that fact, several thoughts have been framed in my mind since reading the novel several years ago and seeing the movie just recently. The thoughts concern the contrast between Islam and Christianity brought into focus by the story. These differences are not that Christians are better people than Muslims, that brutality is limited to the Islamic world, or that the Christians and Muslims would understand the theme of betrayal in starkly different terms. Both Christians and Muslims would agree that Amir's betrayal of Hassan is an evil and sinful act.

No, the big difference is that *The Kite Runner* is based on a false promise and a heart-breaking need. The false promise is that offered to the adult Amir: "There is a way to be good again."

The whole plot suggests that Amir can redeem himself for his sordid betrayal of a young friend by his brave act of rescuing the friend's son, Sohrab. The Christian gospel reminds us that there is no act, however brave, virtuous, or sacrificial, that can make us "good again." Christians understand that our redemption is nothing we can accomplish at all. Instead, our redemption is accomplished by God through the atonement achieved by the obedience of the Son — obedience even unto death on the cross. Furthermore, the gospel never promises us that sinners are made "good" as we are saved by grace through faith. Instead, sinners who come to Christ by faith receive the imputed righteousness of Christ by the declaration of the Father.

By the end of the film, it certainly appears that even Amir does not feel that he has been made "good" by his brave rescue of Sohrab. He remains a deeply troubled soul.

Similarly, viewers of the movie will see a substantial hint of what readers of the novel came to understand — young Sohrab's heartbreaking sense of being forever "dirty" because of the repeated sodomizations he has suffered at the hands of his torturers. Though Amir and his young wife adopt and love the boy, he remains distant and deeply troubled. There is no suggestion in the book or in the movie of how he can be "good again."

Christians should see this movie as an opportunity to acknowledge the power of this moving story and to wrestle with the great issues it raises. Discussions about this movie may well be opportunities to talk about the Gospel and the promise of salvation in Christ.

In the end, *The Kite Runner* is a fascinating and deeply moving story of betrayal and rescue. Missing from the story is the promise of redemption, and that is why the film ends with a most unsatisfying absence of resolution. Where there is no redemption, there is no real sense of hope. There is no "way to be good again" — only a way to be redeemed by the blood of the Lamb.

