

“It’s a Wonderful Life” starring James Stewart, Donna Reed, Lionel Barrymore, 1946, PG, 130 minutes

Major themes:

- Life
- Faith
- Dreams
- Gratitude
- Suicide
- Responsibility
- Greed
- Ethical practices
- Love
- Family
- Community
- Sacrifice

Movie Nights for Thinkers and Seekers

Major characters:

- George Bailey
- Mary Hatch
- Mr. Potter
- Uncle Billy
- Clarence
- Ernie
- Bert
- Mr. Gower
- Sam Wainwright
- Violet
- Pa Peter Bailey
- Mrs. Bailey
- Harry Bailey
- Annie
- Peter, Janie, Zuzu, Tommy

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Background info:

- This film is based on a short story, *"The Greatest Gift"* by Philip Van Doren Stern, published in 1943. Bedford Falls, although set in upstate New York, was modeled on the borough of Califon, New Jersey. The film takes place from 1919 to December 24, 1946. In late 1946 (upon the film's release), lead actor James Stewart wrote to the author, calling the story *"an inspiration to everyone concerned with the picture . . . the fundamental story was so sound and right."*
- The film lost just over half a million dollars at the box office. In 1974, a clerical error prevented the film's copyright from being renewed properly. As a result, it entered the public domain. Because of this, it quickly became a holiday classic, although in 1996, NBC gained exclusive broadcasting rights.
- Despite being set around Christmas, the film was filmed during a heat wave. The iconic scene where James Stewart's character runs through a snow-swept Bedford Falls was actually filmed on a scorching July day.
- The Bailey home set included a photo of James Stewart as an infant (donated by his parents).
- For the scene that required Donna Reed to throw a rock, director Frank Capra hired a marksman to shoot the target window out on cue. To everyone's amazement, Reed broke the window by herself, having played baseball in high school.
- This film is ranked as the #1 on the American Film Institute's 2006 list of the 100 Most Inspiring Films of All Time.
- Frank Capra based George Bailey's character on Amadeo Giannini, founder of Bank of Italy, which became Bank of America. Giannini is credited as the inventor of many modern banking practices, most notably offering banking services beyond the upper class.
- The character of "Angel 2nd class" Clarence Oddbody was born in May 1653.

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- The Martinis are based on director Frank Capra's own family, who emigrated from Sicily in 1903. "Capra" is Italian for "goat", one of which accompanies them in their car.
- Pharmacist Gower's son's death at college is attributed to "Influenza" in the telegram that Young George reads, dated May 3, 1919. The 1918-19 "Spanish Flu Pandemic" was widely spread on the filthy battlefields of the First World War and claimed millions of lives around the world, including 675,000 in the United States.
- The pictures in the Granville house are all enlargements from George's discarded travel brochures.
- The song "Buffalo Gals" is a 19th-century vaudeville song, the most popular in a series that included "New York Gals", "Boston Gals", and "Alabama Gals".
- The compact galaxy group shown in this film are a visual grouping of five galaxies in the Pegasus constellation discovered in 1877 and known as "*Stephan's Quintet*".
- The name Zuzu comes from Zu Zu Ginger Snaps, round drop cookies produced from 1901 until the 1980s. George makes a reference to this near the end of the film.
- At least forty-two bell rings are heard over the course of the film!
- The raven known as "*Jimmy the raven*" appeared in Frank Capra's film "*You Can't Take It with You*" in 1938, after which Capra cast the bird in every subsequent movie he made. The raven appeared in more than 1000 feature films until his death in 1954. James Stewart said of the bird, "*When they call Jimmy, we both answer*" and that he "*is the smartest actor on the set*," requiring fewer retakes than his human counterparts.

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Scriptures:

Deuteronomy 30:19b-20a (The Message) – *“I place before you Life and Death, Blessing and Curse. Choose life so that you and your children will live. And love God, your God, listening obediently to him, firmly embracing him. Oh yes, he is life itself”*

Psalms 119:33-37 (The Message) – *“God, teach me lessons for living so I can stay the course. Give me insight so I can do what you tell me—my whole life one long, obedient response. Guide me down the road of your commandments; I love traveling this freeway! Give me a bent for your words of wisdom, and not for piling up loot. Divert my eyes from toys and trinkets, invigorate me on the pilgrim way.”*

Romans 12:3b-6 (The Message) – *“The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what he does for us, not by what we are and what we do for him. In this way we are like the various parts of a human body. Each part gets its meaning from the body as a whole, not the other way around. The body we’re talking about is Christ’s body of chosen people. Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of his body. But as a chopped-off finger or cut-off toe we wouldn’t amount to much, would we? So since we find ourselves fashioned into all these excellently formed and marvelously functioning parts in Christ’s body, let’s just go ahead and be what we were made to be, without enviously or pridefully comparing ourselves with each other, or trying to be something we aren’t.”*

1 Corinthians 13:4-7 (NLT) – *“Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.”*

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Discussion points:

1. What does this film have to say about the things that give life meaning?
2. Discuss the meaning and significance of Zuzu's petals.
3. What does this film teach us about making a difference in the world?
4. What advice would you give to someone who is wrestling with decisions regarding pursuing self-fulfillment versus dedication to their community? What well-placed questions would you ask them?
5. What is the most inspirational thing about this movie to you?
6. What group comes to mind in your own place and time that might be considered "rabble" by some but who *"do most of the working and paying and living and dying in this community"*?
7. How do the messages in this film apply to the more anonymous society that exists in many parts of the world, in which people tend not to know neighbors or coworkers (or their families) very well?