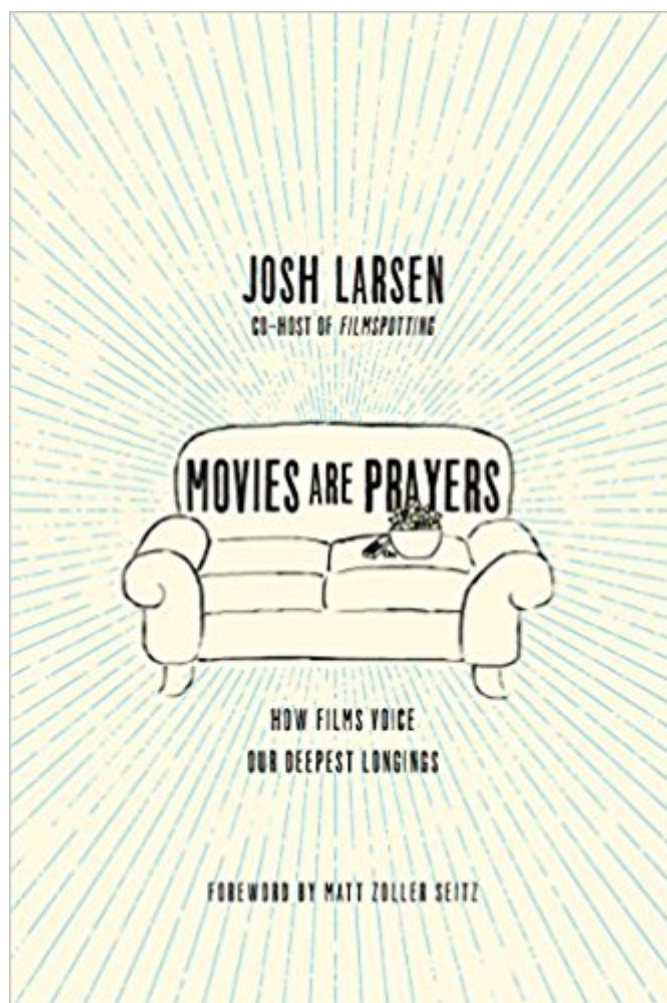


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# Movies Are Prayers: How Films Voice Our Deepest Longings



## Synopsis

"Movies are our way of telling God what we think about this world and our place in it. . . . Movies can be many things: escapist experiences, historical artifacts, business ventures, and artistic expressions, to name a few. I'd like to suggest that they can also be prayers." Movies do more than tell a good story. They are expressions of raw emotion, naked vulnerability, and unbridled rage. They often function in the same way as prayers, communicating our deepest longings and joys to a God who hears each and every one. In this captivating book, Filmspotting co-host Josh Larsen brings a critic's unique perspective to how movies function as expressions to God of lament, praise, joy, confession, and more. His clear expertise and passion for the art of film, along with his thoughtful reflections on the nature of prayer, will bring you a better understanding of both. God's omnipresence means that you can find him whether you're sitting on your sofa at home or in the seats at the theater. You can talk to him wherever movies are shown. And when words fail, the perfect film might be just what you need to jump-start your conversations with the Almighty.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Going far beyond a simple assessment of Christlike martyr figures (the movies are lousy with 'em), Josh Larsen's passionate and movingly reflective new book makes an inspiring case for treating a provocative variety of films as prayers for all seasons. He writes on everything from Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* to Michael Haneke's *Amour*, teasing out the filmmakers' insatiable desire to wrestle with the unknowable. But his democratically theological approach to the medium he loves

brings into play unexpected gems: Polanski's *Chinatown*, or Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (to which Larsen took his future wife on a date). 'Many films,' he writes, 'even the challenging ones, are capable of functioning as messy, mixed-up, miraculous prayer.' I've long been engaged by Larsen's film criticism on Filmspotting, but this book seeks and finds a higher power and a more mysterious set of concerns, somewhere out past the lobby." (Michael Phillips, *Chicago Tribune*) "This is one of the best books on film and theology I've ever read. By conceiving of and engaging with movies as 'prayerful gestures received by God,' Larsen guides the reader in a study that is itself a reverent, prayerful gesture. Packed with insights into how both the content and the form of films can mirror prayer, *Movies Are Prayers* is a must-read for anyone who has ever felt the pangs of transcendence in a movie theater. Yet this is a book as much about prayer as it is about pop culture. Readers will gain not only new language with which to understand movies, but an enlivened paradigm for understanding prayer." (Brett McCracken, film critic for *Christianity Today*, author of *Gray Matters* and *Hipster Christianity*) "There's a lot of writing on film and theology, but a perspective like Larsen's is fresh, insightful, and interesting for anyone is a rare gift to cinephiles and more casual movie viewers alike. In *Movies Are Prayers*, Larsen encourages us to rethink movies as not just vehicles for content, but as actual expressions of the heart's deepest longings, readjusting the way we think about both films and their creators and, by extension, ourselves as viewers and critics." (Alissa Wilkinson, film critic, *Vox.com*, associate professor of English and humanities, *The King's College*) "I'm about as far removed from religion and spirituality as one could possibly be, and yet *Movies Are Prayers* opened up for me an entirely new way of appreciating the movies I love and the art of filmmaking as a whole. As Larsen points out, it's so easy for even the most obsessive cinephiles among us to fall back on viewing cinema through the cynical lens of commercialization or a frothy lens of mere escapist entertainment. By reexamining an array of movies, including the ostensibly secular (*Trainwreck*, *The Muppets*), via the language of prayer, this engagement with the medium uncovers a different and fascinating approach to film theory." (Aisha Harris, *Slate* culture writer, editor, and host of the podcast *Represent*) "With a rich understanding of film history and the Scriptures, Josh Larsen's *Movies Are Prayers* provides a revelatory look at how movies their messages, their characters, and even the process of making them can serve as acts of worship. Larsen's readings of films are welcoming, accessible, and insightful. *Movies Are Prayers* will help Christians everywhere look at film in a whole new light." (David Chen, editor-at-large, *Slashfilm.com*) "Larsen pulls on the complexities of the prayerful posture yearning, lament, confession, joy, and more that bring us closer to the self as recipient of film than previous comparisons of the movie theater with church and

sacred space. Joining the breath of a movie with the breath of prayer, he teaches us anew. This vision of presence and the movements of prayer at the movies are offered through profound films often ignored by the Christian public, making the book a needed addition to the library of the prayerful, reflective, movie-loving Christian." (Rebecca Ver Straten-McSparran, director, L.A. Film Studies Center)"Spoiler alert: Josh Larsen's *Movies Are Prayers* will have you reevaluating your relationship not just to the silver screen, but to story itself. Displaying a prodigious breadth of knowledge and an infectious passion for his subject, Larsen draws an invaluable map of the vast spiritual landscape staked out by cinema while outlining a persuasive, and dare I say exciting, approach to the life of faith—indeed, to life, period. Expansive, gracious, and beautifully written. I'm saying a prayer of grateful awe right now." (David Zahl, editor of *The Mockingbird Blog*, author of *A Mess of Help*)"*Movies Are Prayers* is for the movie lover and the infrequent viewer, the person who prays daily and the one who seldom does. Rather than looking at movies as mere entertainment or a means of teaching moral lessons, Larsen invites us to view the medium as a means of expressing our joy, sorrow, and longings—for a right world, right relationships, and right hearts. In the process, we not only see that movies are prayers, but we see our innate human desire to commune with our Creator." (Erik Parks, filmmaker; Catherine Parks, author of *A Christ-Centered Wedding*; cohosts of *The Whole Spectrum* podcast)

Josh Larsen is co-host of the WBEZ/NPR podcast *Filmspotting* and editor of *Think Christian*, a digital magazine on faith and culture. Previously, he spent eleven years as a film and entertainment critic for Chicago-based *Sun-Times Media*.

The quote that stood out to me the most was "Prayer is the best place for our anger, especially if the alternative are to take it out on others or bottle it up inside." This is something that I've only recently learned to do in my own journey. Josh does a very good job of talking about turning to God in times of not only praise but also lament and anger. I enjoyed reading this very much and will be looking forward to reading it a few more times.

"*Movies Are Prayers*" is a welcome invitation to expand our horizons in both our movie-going and our prayer habits, to consider the forms which shape our character, and to celebrate what God is doing in our lives and our art. Generous and accessible, with a firm grasp of both film theory and theology, "*Movies Are Prayers*" is just the book I'd want to hand to students in a film-and-theology university course, a budding teenage cinephile, or those skeptical of religion yet

open to the transcendent they've experienced in cinema.

I've enjoyed watching films my entire life. I've also been a Christian my entire life. I've never considered weaving the two together as a way to enrich the experiences that both offer. Larsen does just that without being too preachy. Even if you don't consider yourself to be religious this book offers what all great books do...a chance to consider something from a different perspective.

Great book for movie lovers or those interested in finding new meaning in cinema. His style and structure made for a quick read, and he covered all genres of movies - citing examples from the last 100 years. This book is a great addition to what Josh discusses on "Filmspotting" (podcast).

As with movies, there are many genres of prayer, and Larsen dwells on nine of them: praise, yearning, lament, anger, confession, reconciliation, obedience, meditation, and joy. Each of these chapters could be books in themselves, given how many movies are out there and how rich and layered the concept of prayer is. But Larsen, taking a specifically Christian tack, focuses on how those types of prayer and their analogous movies speak to the creation-fall-redemption-restoration trajectory of the Bible and the Christian faith it inspires. Through this prism, the central miracle in *Children of Men* provokes an awe-inducing response to incarnation. The violent anger of *Fight Club* is a primal scream against a fallen world. And the "holy nonsense" of *The Muppets* shows that sometimes joy manifests itself in silly and inexplicable ways. Too often when "Christian" and "movies" come together, a didactic censoriousness and disordered view of art follow. Larsen takes the opposite approach. You'll see no mention of *Left Behind* or *God's Not Dead*, but you will see George Bailey struggling to be obedient in *It's a Wonderful Life* and Alvin's motorized meditations in *The Straight Story* and hushed yearning in *In the Mood for Love*. As his true in his reviews, he brings a generous, exploratory spirit to cinema, seeing the form as good and beautiful and attempting to understand the bad and ugly. Highly recommended!

I was excited about reading *Movies Are Prayers* by Josh Larsen because of my familiarity with him from one of my favorite podcasts, *Filmspotting*. Even so, I was very hesitant because of a poor expectation I was carrying into it. Anyone who has grown up in any sort of religious circle has seen the objects of art and culture poked and prodded time and time again. Whether it was the classic,

revival preacher calling for the destruction of the newest top 40 album or, what I was worried I might find here, that one guy who skews artist intent or stretches every theme to declare a relation to their own religious narrative. Rest assured, you will find none of that here. Instead, there is something much more wonderful at play. Larsen wasted no time in reawakening my view of prayer. He helps remind the readers that it is so much bigger than speaking to something or someone. There is an interaction taking place that is so deep and so full yet too often we stop after a few simple lines of one-way-dialog. If we are to pray without ceasing, what happens when we run out of words? What happens when we don't know the words in the first place? Anyone who has sat and watched a sunset should have some understanding of inspirational or experiential prayer. Even if words weren't said, to be filled with the inspirations of awe, wonder and thankfulness and then to raise those emotions and thoughts upwards is a prayerful experience. Is it too much to think that the same creator who can use a sunset to fill us with prayer or help us realize the words or emotions we did not know how to express could not then use something like a film (which could be completely secular and created by someone holding completely different beliefs) to give us the words, thoughts or emotions to lift our prayers up? This is how prayer without ceasing happens; that when we run out of things to say, we then come upon our prayers, as if they were left there for us to find. After convincing that films do not have to be inherently religious to help viewers find words or emotions to lift up, Larsen then spends the rest of the book laying out his observations of many films and where they have provided for him or can provide for others the same type of experiential prayer. His observations are so refreshing and so different from what I have experienced in the past that I have been inspired to revisit many movies that I had previously felt I had gotten everything out of. For the fan of film, this book will provide a deeper movie watching experience. For the reader who likes to consider spiritual thought and living, *Movies Are Prayers* could be a formative read that enriches not only the way you view movies, but, all art, culture and beyond.

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