

challenges the idea of whether humanity is worth saving, whether it is possible to save, and whether it is possible to be a hero without being corrupted. It makes the best case possible that heroes aren't worth believing in, and then, in the end, it shows how it is possible to be a hero, how humanity can be saved, and why they are worth saving. It is both deeply honest and challenging but also completely affirming of the belief system at the heart of the superhero genre. It is a movie that film critics adored for its deep philosophical ideas and its skillful filmmaking and that audiences adored for its great action, characters, and celebration of heroic values. It is the one superhero movie of which I hear said constantly: "I don't really like superhero movies... but I love *The Dark Knight*."

That's what we need for Christian films.

I grew up being a Christian and loving movies, and I have been asking my whole life for Christian movies that can be both deeply honest and deeply affirming of that faith I hold so dear. It might be a surprise that the best model for doing that comes from superhero movies. But God has spoken his truth through stranger vessels than that. The question, as always, is whether we will listen.

A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS AND THE PERSISTENCE OF HOPE

Zak Schmoll on Why We Refuse to
Despair

Perhaps one of the most obvious characteristics of our world is that evil and suffering exist. No matter how hard we try to improve our condition, the forces of darkness seem to be right behind us, plotting our imminent demise. Yet despite this reality, there is something human about hope. We desire triumph, and we long for the day that all will be made right. Christians know that day is coming in our future, but for now, we can only imagine what it will be like to feel that ultimate victory. This imaginative exercise gives us the strength to push back against evil and persevere in the face of adversity. The recent Netflix production *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, although not at all intended to

be a Christian show, can remind us that hope is never lost even as we await the final, joyous conclusion.

The three seasons of this series chronicle the trials and tribulations of the Baudelaire orphans as they are pursued by the evil Count Olaf. That pursuit manifests itself in different ways in each episode, but the trajectory of each is remarkably similar. Each episode begins with the three orphans in a position of relative safety, usually but not always with some type of seemingly responsible and good guardian. All of the characters are undeniably quirky, and the guardians are no different, but they do not seem to be immediately evil.

True to the title of this series, things begin to happen that are unfortunate, and they are almost always due to the work of Count Olaf, played excellently by Neil Patrick Harris and his bizarre band of henchmen. The Count has his heart set on becoming the legal guardian of the Baudelaire children to take control of the vast fortune that their parents left behind for them when they come of age. There is also a rather interesting backstory regarding the relations between Olaf, the Baudelaire parents, and their friends that causes him to continue pursuing these particular wealthy orphans in lieu of the other ones that he could be pursuing.

Then around the middle of each episode, Olaf is seemingly successful. His plan seems to work, and in one way or another, he pushes them out of their relatively safe situation and into his clutches. Each episode works out a little bit differently, but there is always this transition from at least a moderately safe situation to a great deal of danger and the threat of potential adoption by their devious pursuer.

It is at this point that the remarkable Baudelaire children usually create some ingenious way of escaping the trap they find themselves in. Violet, the oldest, is remarkably inventive. Klaus, the middle child, is a prolific researcher. Sunny, just an infant, has a knack for biting the right things at the right time with her strangely strong teeth and jaws. Through utilizing a combination of these talents, the children manage to somehow escape, and Count Olaf is foiled yet again. Typically, although not in every episode, the children then find themselves placed in the care of yet another reasonably good guardian, but Count Olaf continually escapes justice, and the viewer knows that the cycle is simply going to repeat itself in the next episode.

Watching the three seasons of the show in rather rapid succession allows the viewer to fall into this apparently fated pattern. After seeing a few episodes, it becomes rather obvious that the rotation

of safety, danger, escape, and the return to safety is going to continually repeat itself as the Baudelaire children will never be able to shake the villain who does not care about them but wants their money.

In a way, it feels rather hopeless. The world of this story is constructed such that the children are never going to be able to escape this cycle. Olaf is always going to escape whenever justice comes calling, and he is going to be hot on their heels. The Baudelaires cannot relax for a minute. They cannot find a guardian who they can simply live with for a little while to regroup and begin to adjust to their lives as newly orphaned young people. Instead, they have to keep pushing forward and fighting for escape even though the odds are predetermined to be against them.

And yet the fascinating part is that there is a degree of hope in every one of the stories as well. As the viewer becomes accustomed to this cycle of safety and danger, the continual escapes from Count Olaf seem surprising and predictable all at once. In many episodes, the Baudelaire orphans are in seemingly inescapable circumstances, so the way they escape is certainly surprising each time. On the other hand, though, when the viewer knows there are three seasons, it is a pretty safe bet to conclude that the children are going to survive every episode

to bring the series to its ultimate conclusion (which will not be discussed here to avoid some rather dramatic spoiler alerts). Clearly, though, it would not be very much of a story if the protagonists were simply captured right away and the pursuit was over. That makes the resolution of all of these surprising escapes in fact quite predictable.

The viewer finds him or herself in a type of limbo then. There is the inevitability of hopelessness and the inevitability of hope all at the same time. There is the unsettling reality that everything is going to go wrong and danger is potentially around every corner, but there is also the reality that no danger that comes to them is going to seriously harm them. They are going to be able to overcome whatever happens next.

The Christian worldview paints a very similar picture of our earthly pilgrimage. We find ourselves in a world where there is always an adversary. Sin is a reality in our world. As much as we try to run away from it, we are either always involved in it or feeling the effects of it. As Christians, we try to sin less and become more conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, but we are simply not going to be perfect this side of heaven. Consequently, it is really easy to feel like there is no hope. We are facing a foe that we

simply cannot seem to escape. It is simply an inherent part of our world.

This reality of sin and its vicious pursuit is not all we find in our world. We find the desire for something better and the hope that accompanies it. This is not just a Christian desire. Like the presence of sin and evil is evident to all, this desire for hope cries out in each human heart. Why have so many great philosophers sought after justice? They had a desire to find it, and they had hope that it was possible. It is not just enough to have this wish for the world to become a better place, but we have to believe and even be convinced that it has a chance of happening. It makes you wonder if there is something built into our hearts -- like the fact that the viewer understands that the Baudelaire children are going to survive through three seasons -- that leads us to have this hope in our lives. Do we perhaps know the end of the story but do not actually realize it all the time? Is it somehow written on the human heart that there will be justice one day, and we long for such justice even though some of us do not know what we are actually longing for? Christians know the end of the story -- non-Christians do not -- but is it possible that even non-Christians have some type of inherent, human desire, from being made in the image of God, that there is a reason for hope?

History is full of the stories of people who desired something better and believed it could happen. We see the results. Great people have done so many great things despite the reality of evil in the world. Christians and non-Christians have refused to abandon hope and surrender to hopelessness. Instead, they have fought against the darkness. That leads to one of two possible conclusions. One is the conclusion of the nihilist: Christians are entirely delusional, chasing hope when there is none. The other possibility is that Christian hope is justified in a world where everything will be made right. There is a Source and reason for the desire for justice. That is the Christian worldview. Cultural apologists must be prepared to present a compelling case for the latter.

A Series of Unfortunate Events does not delve into questions of purpose and meaning. It does not try to provide an answer for why bad things always happen to the Baudelaire orphans. It does not even get close to suggesting why there is a pervasive sense of hope built into every one of the episodes where things seem to get marginally better after each catastrophic climax. However, the series provides a bridge for talking about our own world. We all experience this tension between hopelessness and hope. We realize that things seem to go wrong

in our imperfect world, but we also have this desire to make things better. This is no coincidence, but rather evidence in support of the Christian worldview. It resonates with us on the screen because it is consistent with reality. Just like there is a reason we believe the show will turn out okay in the end, there is a Source for that same belief in our own world. Maybe the Source of that belief designed us to recognize that hope will never be lost.