

Movie discussion resource **Nine Days (2020)**

Engage with culture without disengaging your faith.

Genre: Supernatural drama/Science Fiction/Fantasy

Rating: M (mature themes, violence and coarse language)

Length: 2 hours 4 mins

Starring Winston Duke, Zazie Beetz, Benedict Wong, Tony Hale, and Bill Skarsgård

Writer/Director: Edson Oda

Release date in Australia: July 15, 2021



Brief synopsis

Will (Winston Duke) spends his days in a remote outpost watching the live Point of View (POV) on TV's of people going about their lives. When one of them dies unexpectedly, it leaves a vacancy for a new life on earth. Will is tasked to find a replacement from the candidates - unborn souls - who arrive to undergo tests determining their fitness, facing oblivion when they are deemed unsuitable to be human beings. Will's role is as arbiter, like a reverse grim-reaper. His is the task to see who deserves to live a life - and who doesn't.

Will soon faces his own existential challenge in the form of free-spirited Emma (Zazie Beetz), a candidate who is not like the others, forcing him to turn within and reckon with his own tumultuous past. Fuelled by unexpected power, he discovers a bold new path forward in his own life. This is a heartfelt and meditative vision of human souls in limbo, aching to be born against unimaginable odds, yet hindered by forces beyond their will. The film is a tender tale about what it means to be human. (see Wikipedia link 'Nine Days' for a longer plot synopsis)

Questions for discussion

Note: this film may raise some angst and even trauma for people on subjects like suicide and mortality, so a group conversation may need to begin gently to check in on each other.

Some general questions might provide enough framework for you to discuss the movie, such as:

- ❖ What did you appreciate about this movie?
- ❖ What were the highlights?
- ❖ What themes were explored?
- ❖ What assumptions were embedded in the story?
- ❖ What challenged you? What questions did it raise for you?
- ❖ Are there aspects of the story that resonated with your own experience?
- ❖ Are there biblical or theological themes or characters that come to mind?

Here's a big discussion

Pre-existence, beforelife, or premortal existence is the belief that each individual human soul existed before mortal conception, and at some point before birth enters or is placed into the body. Concepts of pre-existence can encompass either the belief that the soul came into existence at some time prior to conception or the belief that the soul is eternal. Ancient Greek thought and Islam affirm pre-existence, but it is generally denied in Christianity.

=> There are BIG existential questions to explore here, respectful that people will have different views on matters, and shaped by different philosophical and religious influences.

=> pre-existence is the *scaffolding* for the film; what do you think is the *meaning* of the film?

Life, in abundance

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon? Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life? (from "The Summer Day" by Mary Oliver)

'You are being considered for the amazing opportunity of life, a chance to be born in a fruitful environment where you can grow, develop and accomplish'. (movie quote, by Will)

Will has told Emma that he cannot tell her anything about his previous life, but in response to her showing concern for him, he indicates that in his previous life he once gave a theatre performance that made him feel alive, but never pursued his passion after that. He reacts

angrily when another candidate, Alex, points out Will's hypocrisy for judging people's lives when he never did anything meaningful with his own life.

=> This could lead to a sharing about missed opportunities, disappointments about beginnings that never led anywhere or were stopped along the way, and reflection on Mary Oliver's question about how you plan to use your one wild and precious life.

Candidates for life

Will asks the candidates simple questions about life and has them take notes on what they like or dislike about the lives of others who were chosen. Over the course of the nine days, most of the candidates are dismissed for various reasons, such as self-consciousness and lack of respect for suffering.

=> If those chosen to join the living were selected on their capacity for kindness, compassion and empathy etc, what would the world be like? Is this what the reign of God is like? Discuss.

=> Even the 'best' and most talented candidates can be overwhelmed by situations in 'real life' and lose heart. Pre-selection of the 'best' candidate is no guarantee of a 'successful' life. Will's character carries wounds from his own living, and one of the living takes their own life. Discuss.

Emma

On multiple occasions, Will's colleague Kyo (Benedict Wong) indicates Emma's suitability. But Will isn't interested in her, perhaps because of her optimistic charming personality, and the way she is in touch with and expresses her emotions, and her good sense of humour. Will's perspective comes from his own experience as a human himself. He claims that humankind is not as cheery and kind as Kyo (who has never been human) thinks. Will's pessimism and overwhelming philosophy of the big bad world seem more realistic; Emma's optimistic, life-embracing attitude towards the fruits of life doesn't seem all too weary either. Emma encourages Will to look within and find out more about himself that he has been shutting off for quite some time.

=> Does the world need more 'Emmas'?

=> Is there a gendered question here about 'emotional intelligence' eg men are somehow seen as 'weak' if they show emotions. They are supposed to 'man up' and deal with things.

Is Will God - arbiter? judge? remote?

I don't believe in a God up in the sky/ who sits in heaven and never hears me cry.

I don't believe in a God who's far away - I believe in Jesus living here with us today.

(Robin Mann, God version 1.0)

"...we do not believe in God, that mythical being who sits on a throne in a far-off perfect land. Nor do we believe in the Monster-God, who lies in wait to punish us for mistakes and crimes." *(Dick Westley, p.85 'Redemptive Intimacy')*.

Eric Kohn describes Will as 'a jaded middle-manager trapped in a purgatorial cycle of interviewing souls for the opportunity of life'.

=> Discuss in what ways Will is NOT like God, or aspects that fit our understanding of God?

Doing our theology

Psalm 139 (selected verses) O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You are acquainted with all my ways. You formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.

=> what do you understand about the cycle/circle of life, held in God's embrace before, during and after our years of living as human persons?

Walt Whitman, Song of Myself poem

The poem is long, and considers the experience of being human among other humans in the natural world. It is part of the climax of the film. It may be something to read at a later time.