

The Ultimate Question

The movie 'Saving Private Ryan' portrays the story of eight men who are ordered to go behind enemy lines shortly after D-day to bring back the sole remaining son of a mother who's three other sons had been recently killed in the war. The obvious moral conflict in the movie concerns if it is right to risk the lives of eight men in order to save the life of one man.

The two platoon leaders at one point discuss this dilemma of risking eight for one but finally decide that if they can actually rescue the young man and return him to safety then perhaps they would have done one good deed in spite of all the killing and anguish of the invasion. The eight men make their way behind enemy lines and eventually find the young Private Ryan. Along the way one of their number is killed in a skirmish with the Germans and a captured German had been released as a 'humanitarian gesture'. At the end of the movie this same German reneges on his promise to go home and returns to the war and ultimately kills several of the eight soldiers in the final fight of the movie. In all, seven of the men are killed but the Private is saved. He spends his life trying to be worthy of the sacrifice they have made on his behalf.

Initially one believes the trade off is not worth it until you realize that the fate of the eight men had already been set by circumstances. They were a squad of men assigned difficult and dangerous tasks and in retrospect the viewer can discern that the final outcome for them will inevitably be death. The true question then becomes not whether the men would die but rather, having their deaths preordained, what would they purchase with their lives. They chose to purchase the life of Private Ryan. This realization makes the final outcome of the movie more palatable and accepted.

If one takes the next moral step beyond these obvious considerations one has to closely examine his or her own life in the same context. We, too, are all preordained to die. Although on a slightly different time frame than the eight soldiers, we all will surely die. And in light of these thoughts one is faced with the ultimate question of self-perception and personal value. What will you choose to buy with *your* life?