

THE 5TH QUARTER

A FILM COMPANION



RISING FROM TRAGEDY
TO TRIUMPH



BASED ON AN INSPRIRATIONAL TRUE STORY

INTRODUCTION

Based on a true story, the powerful and thought-provoking new film, ***The 5th Quarter***, takes audiences inside the lives of the Abbate family and their struggle with the untimely death of the family's youngest son, Luke, who in 2006 was killed in a reckless driving accident at the tender age of fifteen.

"If God is so good, how could he let such bad things happen to such good people?" ***The 5th Quarter*** vividly brings this perennial concern to dramatic life, and offers a *distinctively Christian* response to the problem of suffering. To be sure, ***The 5th Quarter*** is a tale of heartache—a heartache that nearly rips a devoted family apart. But the tale does not end in despair. This is because, at its heart, the *faith* of the Abbate family transforms what might have been a not untypical domestic tragedy into a compelling story of hope, healing and Redemption.

Playing a major role in the family's healing process is son Jon Abbate's role on the Wake Forest University football team. At first emotionally unable to return to the practice field after Luke's death, Jon has to struggle to overcome his grief. When he finally does return to the team, he dedicates the season to the memory of his brother. As part of the dedication, Jon begins, at the start of the final quarter of each game, to hold up his hand in the number "five," Luke's number on his

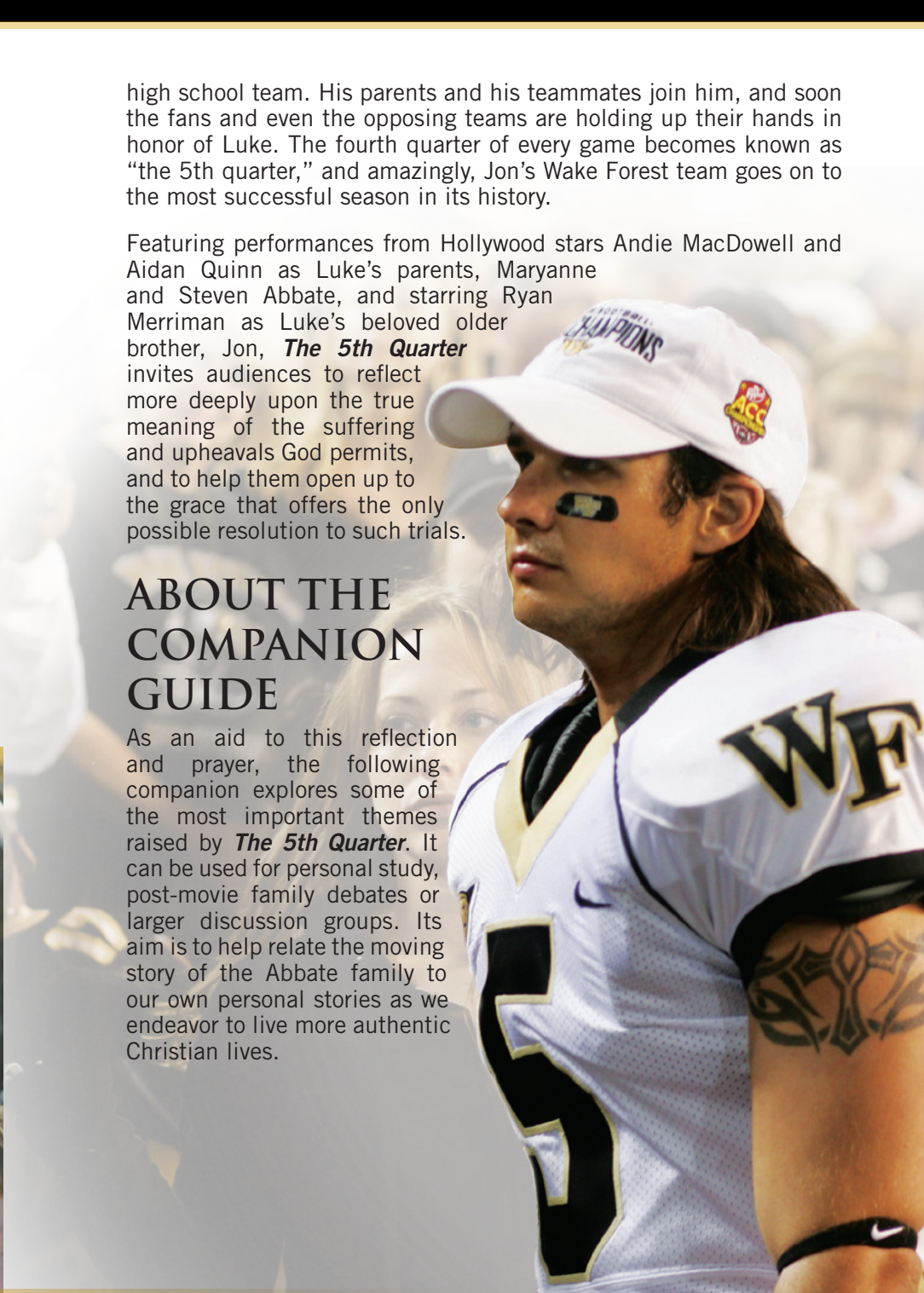


high school team. His parents and his teammates join him, and soon the fans and even the opposing teams are holding up their hands in honor of Luke. The fourth quarter of every game becomes known as "the 5th quarter," and amazingly, Jon's Wake Forest team goes on to the most successful season in its history.

Featuring performances from Hollywood stars Andie MacDowell and Aidan Quinn as Luke's parents, Maryanne and Steven Abbate, and starring Ryan Merriman as Luke's beloved older brother, Jon, ***The 5th Quarter*** invites audiences to reflect more deeply upon the true meaning of the suffering and upheavals God permits, and to help them open up to the grace that offers the only possible resolution to such trials.

ABOUT THE COMPANION GUIDE

As an aid to this reflection and prayer, the following companion explores some of the most important themes raised by ***The 5th Quarter***. It can be used for personal study, post-movie family debates or larger discussion groups. Its aim is to help relate the moving story of the Abbate family to our own personal stories as we endeavor to live more authentic Christian lives.



WHY DOES GOD PERMIT SUFFERING?

One day after school, young Luke Abbate, instead of waiting for his mother to pick him up as arranged, accepts a ride home from another boy. Only moments later, all the promise of Luke's life is snuffed out. When events such as this happen in our lives, one first reaction often is, *Where was God?* God is a God of order and goodness, who looks upon his children with a father's solicitude. *Why* would he—*how* could he—let such a thing happen?

First and foremost, it is important to keep in mind that God is not the *cause* of human suffering. Although God is all-powerful, he did not "make" Luke Abbate's accident happen, nor is he directly responsible for our own hardships. The *cause* of human suffering is original sin, that primal act of disobedience that destroyed the family relationship with God that the Father intended us to enjoy from all eternity.

By disobeying God's command, Adam preferred himself to God. He exalted his own sense of freedom above God's benevolent plan for him, and undermined his trust in God's fatherly care. But the consequences of Adam's sin were even more devastating than this. For in refusing to submit to God's authority, he implicated the rest of humanity in his deed—*all of us*, until the end of time.

"Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin...so death spread to all because all have sinned" (Romans 5:12).

This is a great mystery. Why should we all be implicated in Adam's crime? Christian thinkers have pondered this question for centuries, and it is impossible to fully capture the reality of this mystery in human terms. Somehow, the mystery hinges upon the *unity of all human beings*. In sinning



Adam stood for us all; he represented human nature itself. Thus his crime is heaped upon our shoulders. By the same token, when we sin, our crime is not merely personal. In a mysterious way, our sins affect all humanity.

"The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23), and so, from Adam on, all human beings have owed God the price of their death. True, Christ has come to redeem our lives, but his promise of Redemption does not cancel out this most dire consequence of original sin. Even a young man like Luke Abbate, good and faithful and with everything to live for, owes God a death.



No scenes in *The 5th Quarter* are more heartrending than those in which the Abbate family first learns of Luke's death, when they hover over him in the hospital hoping he might pull through and when they grieve with family and friends at Luke's funeral. The film reminds us that even for those deeply committed to the faith, the pain of loss remains acute. Faith does not make suffering disappear.

And yet, the film also shows us that suffering does not have the last word. God permits

evil because it is the just recompense for sin. It is *because* God is good that evil exists. But God's goodness is so great, he permits evil in order to bring forth *an even greater good than otherwise would have existed*. With man's disobedience Christ came into the world. *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:16). Christ's sacrifice repairs the damage caused by Adam—and by us. Christ's sacrifice reconciles us to the Father, and makes possible something that Adam could not imagine: perfect union with the Father *in Christ* for all eternity!

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

Have there been times when you have questioned God's loving providence? What is your attitude to God when you see innocence suffer—whether others or yourself?



Do you find suffering to be senseless—that it has *no point*? If so, then would you be open to considering that its point might be divine justice for sin—as well as something even sweeter than justice: God’s desire to give us an even greater good, Christ himself?

Even as they “*pass through the valley of the shadow of death*” (Psalm 23), the Abbate family experiences the consolation of Christ’s redeeming sacrifice—a consolation they achieve *together as a family*. In what ways has your family bonded together in tough times to experience similar consolation? How can your family do better at this task?

The Abbate family also has a developmentally-disabled daughter. What does this daughter’s depiction in the film say about the value of each and every human life, even of those in the grips of significant suffering?

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES TO PONDER:

“Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous” (Romans 5: 18-19).

See also: 1 Corinthians 13:12; 2 Corinthians 5:7

HOW ARE WE SUPPOSED TO GO ON?

The 5th Quarter makes clear that the consolation of Christian faith, while real, is no magic wand that we wave over our problems, making them all disappear. The film confirms that, customarily, God’s merciful love restores our peace in him and with others *over time*. But this raises the question: *How are we supposed to get through this time in the dark valley?* The answer is found in realizing that suffering is a kind of invitation, an invitation to personal transformation in Christ. Christian consolation, to borrow a key theme from **The 5th Quarter**, demands a “work-out” in holiness.

What are the keys to Christian transformation as portrayed in the film? Four are significant. Above all, the *faith* of the Abbate family. What, for example, do we see Maryanne Abbate doing when Luke is fighting for his life in the hospital? Reading from Scripture. Leaning upon God. Trusting in his Word. Depending upon her Father.

Second, even in their darkest moments, the Abbate family never entirely despairs. They live by *hope*. Hope is not a kind of wishful thinking. It is not a cheery optimism that we somehow summon up from within ourselves. Hope is a firm, confident conviction, born of faith, that God holds us in the palm of his hand, and that he will not let us go (unless we let him) until he has perfectly united us to himself.

But the faith and hope of the Abbate family are founded, of course, upon *love*, their love for God, for their neighbors, for each other. Jon, for example, does not take to the field before he takes time to pray, thus placing his love of football in proper relation to his love for God. But the film also shows moving scenes of the love the Abbates receive from others. Luke’s friends from school, as well as his teachers and coaches, all come to the hospital to bid



him goodbye. Jon's coaches and friends at Wake Forest come to his aid when they see him struggling with his grief. Jon himself flies home from school to comfort his sister and his mother.

Just as original sin only begins to be intelligible against the backdrop of the mysterious unity of all human beings, so too Christian love builds upon the fact that we share a creaturely bond with each and every person. It is an insight into this reality that prompts Luke, when he receives his first driver's license, to check the organ donor box—making possible the rescue of five other persons whom he would never meet.

Out of faith, hope and love stems a fourth important ingredient of Christian transformation: *courage*. Courage is the ability to consistently face up to the obstacles that inevitably arise on our journey toward God. Having courage does not mean that we no longer feel fear and sadness. Rather, it is *not giving in* to these obstacles. Courage means that our desire to achieve a great good counts more for us than what we might lose in doing so. Thus it is with courage that Maryanne Abbate rises from her bed of anguish in order to grab hold of all that is still good in her life. And it is with courage that Jon Abbate rejoins his teammates on the field when his near-paralyzing sorrow makes him wonder whether he'll ever play football again.

Football, in fact, serves in the film as a metaphor of courageous transformation. As the Wake Forest team enjoys the most successful season in its history, they endure a series of difficulties: not only more and more formidable opposition, but also injuries to key players. But through it all they band together and never give up, going on to achieve a 10-2 record in the regular season, victory in the ACC Championship and a trip to the Orange Bowl.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

The keys to Christian transformation outlined above have been traditionally known as the *virtues*. The particularly Christian virtues of faith, hope and charity are essentially *gifts*. We don't attain them as we might attain a human skill. God has to give them to us. But in what ways do we make ourselves *ready* for the marvelous gift of the Christian virtues? Do we ask God to give us these gifts? Do we understand that even the gifts we have can be increased? Could we make ourselves more receptive to God's gifts by conscious acts of faith, hope and love?

Often we are so focused on our personal comfort and pleasure that even the least unexpected circumstance causes us to be irritable and lacking in patience. Then, when more significant suffering comes along, we are left unprepared. Everyday life gives us countless opportunities to grow in virtue. What everyday difficulties, big or small, can we identify in our lives? How can we, like Jon Abbate, face them with a more "sporting" spirit?

Does our culture of sports in America tend to prepare us well for the acquisition of the virtues? What does the film have to say about this?

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES TO PONDER:

"Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body"
(Colossians 3:14-15).

See also: Psalm 139; 1 Corinthians 13; John 16:33



HOW CAN WE STAY CONNECTED?

One of the most powerful issues raised by *The 5th Quarter* has to do with our desire to stay connected with loved ones who have died. Upon the death of someone close to us, our first, natural inclination is to try to hold on to that person in some tangible way. This explains, at least in part, the Abbate family's initial reaction when they are asked at the hospital about donating Luke's organs. Even though Luke has been declared clinically brain dead, they want Luke to remain "intact." They want to hang on to him just as they have known him.

This desire to stay physically connected to the dead is also stirringly portrayed in Steven Abbate's decision to wheel his son's casket out of the church after the funeral service all by himself, and when he tells Maryanne that he still senses Luke's presence in the house: "He's here—I can feel it." Maryanne herself decides not to clean Luke's room for months after his death, even to the point of leaving his shaving stubble in the sink.

We want those who have died to remain with us. We want to feel their real presence. Tangible reminders have their rightful place. The fact that Luke's donated heart ultimately helps a young woman gain a new lease on life is a beautiful testament to Luke's generosity. It is one way in which Luke "lives on." But not even the presence of Luke's heart in another person can *fully* satisfy his family's desire to remain in intimate communion with him. *Can* this desire be satisfied?

Faith tells us that in a profound sense we can remain connected to the dead—*spiritually*. At one point in the film, one of Jon's Wake Forest teammates tells him after a victory: "Luke was with you today, I know he was." Such a sentiment only has meaning if there exists, even after death, a mysterious unity among the members of Christ's body. The most *intimate connection* with another human being, in other words, is communion in Christ.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

What are your thoughts on organ donation? In watching the film, did you think the nurse pursuing an organ donation approached the Abbate family too soon? If so, then how might she have handled things differently?

How do you stay connected to loved ones who have died? We all retain cherished memories and tangible reminders, but in what ways do you connect with them on a spiritual level? In what ways can you keep active in heart and mind that you remain living members of Christ's body?

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES TO PONDER:

"Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself until it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches" (John 15:4-5).

See also: John 6:56; 1 Corinthians 12: 12-13



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