



Spiritual Understandings from Under the Sea: *The Little Mermaid* (2023)

I will admit it: when the release date of the new *Little Mermaid* film was announced, I eagerly started a countdown, and had already listened to

the soundtrack multiple times by the time the movie opened. I was a toddler when the original cartoon debuted, and I was obsessed with the singing, swimming redhead. I am always a little wary of the live-action Disney remakes, especially for movies with such nostalgic adoration, but this one did not disappoint. The newest iteration brings the beloved animated classic to life with all of the bright beauty of the original and adds some interesting new elements, as well. Although not exact to the former version, the deviations enhance the story, and still allow a faithfulness to the cartoon rather than the original Hans Christian Anderson tale (thank goodness for that. Take a look at the synopsis if you don't know what I'm talking about). Details aside, though, at its core, *The Little Mermaid* contains some genuine spiritual themes to consider. Amidst the fun songs and special effects, we see elements of relational reconciliation, identity, deception, and sacrifice.

The Little Mermaid features some delightful new developments that nod to the old favorite. It is quite satisfying musically. The film is visually stunning, from the imposing ships right down to the iridescent scales on Ariel's fin. Of course, the opportunity to watch "live" mermaids and fish interact underwater is amazing, as well. The new film features almost all of the same songs as the original, with the somewhat sad omission of Sebastian's kitchen chase with Chef Louie, which was a personal favorite. There are some new titles, as well, thanks to the creative talent of Lin Manuel-Miranda. The characters are excellently portrayed, although Flounder the fish is a bit droopy compared to his animated counterpart, and Scuttle is a little more obnoxious than the original. The movie also adds emphasis to the animosity between humans and merpeople, playing on mythology to bring in elements of acceptance and the dangers of prejudice.

In addition to creative story details and musical entertainment, there are some themes in *The Little Mermaid* that can help us start conversations about faith, and helpful principles we can glean and use with young people. One theme is the sense of longing for another world. Ariel wants to know more about humans and life above the sea. Eric yearns for love and adventure in "uncharted waters." As heirs of the kingdom in heaven who are earth-bound, we have a God-given sense of longing for heaven, knowing something greater awaits us (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

We also see in the film positive principles for relationships and reconciliation. Both the humans and the mermaids learned to see others for who they were rather than judging all based on story or stereotype. There is also a component of sacrificial love, with Triton giving himself up to save Ariel. These relationships both show us the impact of sin and how God desires to work through us to reflect His love to others.

Identity is explored as a theme, as well, particularly placing identity in the wrong things. Ariel is not only a citizen of a good kingdom that gives her everything she needs, but she is also heir to that kingdom's throne. Yet she is not content. She idolizes and covets what she could have. Ariel wanted so much to change that she was willing to trade part of herself to become a human. She listened to Ursula's lies and

went along with her sorcery. All along, though, her father had the power to transform her. Ursula disguised herself in order to deceive, and made Ariel forget her mission as a human. There is a strong connection here to Satan, the deceiver and accuser. He seeks to make us forget who we truly are, and we look to the wrong things to find identity. Our true character should be in Christ, who can offer transformation and new life.

At the end of the day, *The Little Mermaid* is a timeless story that captivates all of us with the strength of love. Of course, we can't forget that nothing outweighs God's love for us and the identity we have in Him. Ultimately, the movie is wholesome, compelling, and energizing, and has something to offer for all ages.

Make it a Movie Night!

This is a great opportunity to host a movie night for teens. Plan some themed decorations and food, and kick off with a couple of games and prizes, or simply sit back and enjoy the movie. Follow up with some devotional questions. Make sure to encourage youth students that *The Little Mermaid* is not just for kids or females, but has something to offer everyone. If you'd like to turn this into a fun nautical event, consider some creative mood-setting twists:

- Enjoy a seafood supper "under the sea." Or if it seems morbid to devour the movie characters, have some Caribbean cuisine instead.
- If snacks are more the menu, enjoy goldfish or Swedish fish, dried seaweed, or decorative cupcakes and starfish-shaped cookies.
- Combine the movie with a pool party, or if that's not in season, bring the beach inside with lounge chairs, towels, and indoor "sharks and minnows."
- Decorate with aquatic colors (blues, greens, purple), netting, bubbles, anchors, and more.

Bring it Back to Scripture!

Talk about how to use the movie to discuss spiritual truths with students. Consider some questions based on the characters and action of the film:

- The mermaids and the humans in the movie assumed the worst about each other, without actually getting to know who they were or what their intentions were. Have you ever seen this happen in history or society? Why is it important to judge people based on how God sees them, rather than stereotypes?
- How did Ariel and Eric fall in love so quickly, without even knowing who the other was? Is this realistic? What should we look for in authentic relationships?
- How could Ariel and King Triton each have acted differently and more respectfully towards each other? Why is it important that God gave us parents and instructs us to honor them?
- Ursula added a special spell to Ariel's "potion" to make her forget that she needed to kiss Eric. How does Satan make us forget who we are and what our goals should be?
- The sea witch also disguised herself to deceive Eric. How are we sometimes deceived?
- Ariel wanted to change her identity and was willing to resort to sorcery to do it, when all along her father had the power to transform her. What do we sometimes mistakenly look to for identity? Who has the power to truly change us and identify us?
- Sometimes we want something so much or become so discontent that we are willing to give up the good gifts God gives us to get it. How does Ariel's story remind us of times we have broken the 1st, 9th and 10th commandments? Who saves us and reminds us of our identity as God's children first when we do this?
- How do we remember who we are and WHOSE we are? (Baptism!)
- (For fun) Did you have a favorite character or song in the movie?