

SUNDAY ARTICLE

ST DAVID'S PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ♦ 30 JULY 2017



The Movie Reviewed

Martin Saunders

*Currently showing
at the Grand
Central Cinema*

The evacuation of the British Army at Dunkirk is part of a period in World War 2 history that Winston Churchill called ‘the darkest hour’.

France had fallen, the US army were still far away, and the British Empire stood alone and in retreat against the rising forces of Nazi Germany and its allies.

It’s hard to imagine a more bleak or desperate prospect than an army of 400,000 men trapped on a beach, as brutal enemies closed in. And thanks to Christopher Nolan, we no longer need to imagine.

Nolan’s *Dunkirk* absolutely translates the oppressive, relentless horror of that ‘darkest hour’ to the big screen.

Plunged into the heart of the action from three overlapping vantage points, we follow the lives of the men who fought, fought for life, and fought for others in the famous evacuation.

What follows is as brutal as history demands it to be. The Germans, intent on wiping out the whole British army as it retreats, constantly shoot, bomb and torpedo their terrified foes, and as such the tension barely relents for a single moment of the film’s 106-minute running time.

Despite what we might know as fact, Nolan manages to totally convince us that the darkest hour offers no escape.

And yet, as the history books remind us, hope was not defeated on that French beach. Instead, what’s become known as ‘the miracle of Dunkirk’ took place, as by sheer force of will and collective courage, Britain returned close to 340,000 soldiers home to England – men who would go on to play a part in the eventual reversal of the war.

It’s no overstatement to call *Dunkirk* a masterpiece. It is fantastically immersive; it is masterfully told; it

insists that you care about a whole cast of characters, even if you’ve only met them for a moment. A grand story of nations is told through just a few seemingly insignificant players, and the result is a film which takes hold of your being and forces you to see history afresh.

The extraordinary redemption story of *Dunkirk* is all due to humble, ordinary people who decided to play their part. These men – and boys – left behind because they were deemed the wrong age to fight, were absolutely average. All that set them apart was their willingness to see light defeat darkness, even if it meant laying down their own lives. For once, the clearly-resonant Christian themes hardly need pointing out.

Nolan’s film truly is extraordinary.



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<https://www.christiantoday.com/article/dunkirk.review.a.magnificent.light.in.our.darkest.hour/111004.htm>

The Christian History of the Miracle of Dunkirk

David E Gardner

May 1940 was a time of grave crisis for the British Empire and for the whole civilized world.

On 10 May, Hitler had launched his blitzkrieg against the Low Countries and France. By the end of the second week in May the French defences had been broken. German forces, led by Rommel and his 7th Panzer Division, burst through and with lightning speed began a rapid advance across France and Belgium. Very soon Rommel’s armoured pincer movement was threatening the British army with encirclement, and our forces were being obliged to withdraw.

Back at home, Mr Churchill feared that it would be his hard lot to announce the greatest military disaster in our long history, whilst on 27 May, the German High Command went so far as to boast that, “The British army is encircled and our troops are proceeding to its annihilation.”

With the entire front collapsing rapidly, the decision was reached at home to evacuate our forces from the Continent. But, the only port from which to evacuate the British Expeditionary Force was Dunkirk, and that

was already being seriously threatened by the Germans. Taking stock of the predicament, Churchill said in *The Second World War*, "I thought – and some good judges agreed with me – that perhaps 20,000 or 30,000 men might be re-embarked. The whole root and core and brain of the British army... seemed about to perish upon the field, or to be led into ignominious and starving captivity." All therefore seemed about to be lost.

Britain had a godly Sovereign

Seeing this situation developing, His Majesty King George VI requested that Sunday, 26 May, should be observed as a National Day of Prayer. In a stirring broadcast, he called the people of Britain and of the Empire to commit their cause to God. Together with members of the Cabinet, the King attended Westminster Abbey, whilst millions of his subjects in all parts of the Commonwealth and Empire flocked to the churches to join in prayer. Britain was given inspiring leadership in those days, and her people responded immediately when this kind of initiative was taken. The whole nation was at prayer on that Sunday.

In its hour of deep distress a heart-cry from both monarch and people alike was going up to God in prayer. And, that cry did not go unanswered. For very soon, at least three miracles were seen to happen.

The first miracle

The first was that for some reason – which has never yet been fully explained – Hitler overruled his generals and halted the advance of his armoured columns at the very point when they could have proceeded to the British army's annihilation. They were now only 10 miles away! Later, Mr Churchill asserted in his memoirs that this was because Hitler undoubtedly believed "that his air superiority would be sufficient to prevent a large-scale evacuation by sea."

The second miracle

A storm of unprecedented fury broke over Flanders on Tuesday, 28 May, (1940), grounding the German Luftwaffe squadrons and enabling the British army formations, now eight to twelve miles from Dunkirk, to move up on foot to the coast in the darkness of the storm and the violence of the rain, with scarcely any interruption from aircraft, which were unable to operate in such turbulent conditions.

The third miracle

Despite the storm in Flanders, a great calm – such as has rarely been experienced – settled over the English Channel during the days which followed, and its waters became as still as a mill pond. It was this quite extraordinary calm which enabled a vast armada of little ships, big ships, warships, privately owned motor-cruisers from British rivers and estuaries – in fact,

almost anything that would float – to ply back and forth in a desperate bid to rescue as many of our men as possible.

A strange immunity

Even though some German squadrons did get through, it seems that yet another miracle happened. Many of the troops on the beaches were favoured with a strange immunity. When about 400 men were being machine-gunned and bombed, systematically, by about sixty enemy aircraft, one man who flung himself down with the rest reported that, after the strafing was over, he was amazed to find that there was not a single casualty.

Another man, a chaplain, was likewise machine-gunned and bombed as he lay on the beach. After what seemed an eternity, he realized he had not been hit, and rose to his feet to find that the sand all around where he had been lying was pitted with bullet holes, and that his figure was outlined on the ground.

A Day of National Thanksgiving

So grateful was the nation for this mighty deliverance that Sunday, 9 June 1940 was appointed as a Day of National Thanksgiving. On the eve of that day, C B Mortlock stated in an article in *The Daily Telegraph* that "the prayers of the nation were answered... Officers of high rank do not hesitate to put down the deliverance of the British Expeditionary Force to the fact of the nation being at prayer on Sunday, 26 May, two days before that great storm in Flanders and the calm that came over the Channel."

Psalm 124 sung in the churches

When the services of national thanksgiving were held in all churches, it was with great feeling that many a choir and congregation sang the words of Psalm 124, for they were seen to apply to that situation through which the nation had just passed:

"If the Lord himself had not been on our side, now may Israel say: If the Lord himself had not been on our side, when men rose up against us; They would have swallowed us up quick... Our soul is escaped even as a bird out of the snare of the fowler: the snare is broken, and we are delivered. Our help standeth in the name of the Lord: who hath made heaven and earth."

Rev David E Gardner served as a submariner in the Royal Navy during World War II.

Edited from: <https://www.movieguide.org/news-articles/history-in-the-movies-the-miracle-of-dunkirk.html>

Extracted from: *The Trumpet Sounds for Britain* (2002) available from AbeBooks.com

