

CUBA GOODING JR.
GIFTED HANDS
THE BEN CARSON STORY



STUDY GUIDE

CREW OVERVIEW

Written by: **John Pielmeier**

Based on the book by: **Benjamin Carson, M.D. and Cecil Murphey**

Directed by: **Thomas Carter**

CAST OVERVIEW

Cuba Gooding Jr. (*Ben Carson*)

Kimberly Elise (*Sonya Carson*)

Aunjanue Ellis (*Candy Carson*)

USING THIS DISCUSSION GUIDE

Intended for use after viewing the film, this study guide provides catalysts for biblically-based discussion of various themes found in *Gifted Hands*. The guide features three themes from the movie and is structured in such a way that groups can choose to discuss the entire guide at once or can focus on one or two themes at a time.

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FILM OVERVIEW/NOTE TO GROUP

Oscar®-winning actor Cuba Gooding Jr. (Actor in a Supporting Role, *Jerry Maguire*, 1996) stars in *Gifted Hands*, a biographical film based on the inspiring true story of world-renowned pediatric neurosurgeon Ben Carson. Despite numerous and daunting obstacles that plague his childhood – and some that follow him into adulthood – Ben perseveres with faith, courage, and an understanding of his God-given abilities, all qualities that serve to help him realize his potential and achieve his dreams.

The movie opens in 1987 amidst Ben's struggle to find a successful way to separate craniopagus twins from West Germany. As Ben wrestles with a solution, the movie flashes back to his childhood in Detroit, Michigan, during the 1960s. In these formative years, Ben's life is marked by a series of challenges (the absence of a father, poverty, racism, his temper), and Ben's mother, Mrs. Carson (played by Kimberly Elise), can't escape the personal demons that created the family's situation, struggling with an uncontrollable darkness until she seeks and receives help from a local psychiatric hospital.

At one turning point, Mrs. Carson realizes that education may be her boys' only chance to develop their talents. She establishes new rules for her children, cutting down their television hours and requiring them to read two books per week. As she sees them grow and succeed in their academic endeavors, she enlists the help of her most recent employer to teach her to read, as illiteracy has always been a mark of shame in her own life.

Ben goes on to achieve honors in middle school and high school, securing himself a spot at Yale University in 1969. During his collegiate years, he meets his wife Candy (Aunjanue Ellis) and realizes his passion for the human brain – a discovery that leads him to pursue a career in the highly competitive and selective field of neurosurgery. Pushing through bouts of self-doubt, Ben eventually earns a residency at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, a feat of immense proportions considering there are just two resident positions available in neurosurgery.

With compassion, ingenuity, and dedication, Ben becomes the head of pediatric neurosurgery at Johns Hopkins. Along the journey, his determination to help ailing children leads to the successful use of the hemispherectomy (removal of half the brain) and to the solution to prevent craniopagus twins from bleeding out during surgery. This latter finding is what allows a team of over fifty people to separate and save the West German twins during a 22-hour surgery in 1987.

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OVERCOMING ADVERSITY THROUGH PERSEVERANCE

Guiding Scripture: **James 1:2-4 (NIV):** *“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”*

SCRIPTURE REFERENCED:

- **1 Chronicles 16:11 (NIV):** “Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always.”
- **Psalms 37:23-24 (NIV):** “If the Lord delights in a man’s way, he makes his steps firm; though he stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand.”
- **Matthew 5:11-12 (NIV):** “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”
- **Luke 6:31 (NIV):** “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”
- **Romans 8:18 (NIV):** “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”
- **1 Corinthians 9:24 (NIV):** “...Run in such a way as to get the prize.”
- **2 Corinthians 12:10 (NIV):** “That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”
- **Hebrews 10:36 (NIV):** “You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.”
- **James 1:2-4 (NIV):** “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”
- **James 1:12 (NIV):** “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.”

DVD SCENES TO REVIEW:

A PUBLIC SHAMING

(00:32:52 – 00:34:57, CHAPTER 4)

THE STRUGGLE WITH TEMPER

(00:41:49 – 00:43:54, CHAPTER 5)

HOSPITAL ROUNDS

(00:53:40 – 00:55:56, CHAPTER 6)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- As you begin this theme discussion, take a moment to discuss the obstacles that the Carson family faced in Detroit in the 1960s, as shown in the beginning half of the movie. What are your initial thoughts about their situation and struggles?
- Consider Mrs. Carson. She's a single mother with a haunting past, and even though she loves her children, she battles with her personal history. What is the darkness that she describes? Can you relate to this kind of pain? Why or why not?
- Likewise, consider Ben and his brother Curtis. How do their early circumstances shape their characters and personalities?



Things seem to improve for the Carson family by the time Ben reaches eighth grade. Mrs. Carson is back home with her children, doing much better after seeking help from the hospital. Ben and Curtis are achieving honors with their schoolwork. Yet, even amidst these most welcome joys, the Carsons can't escape the awful grip of racism.

SCENE TO REVIEW:

A PUBLIC SHAMING (00:32:52 – 00:34:57, CHAPTER 4)

- What kind of reaction does this scene elicit from you?

At first, it seems that the teacher is going to say something positive – perhaps that Ben has achieved great things despite his disadvantages. Instead, she proceeds to completely demoralize him in front of the assembly.

- How does the teacher's speech impact Ben? Mrs. Carson? Curtis? What kind of emotions do they emanate toward the end of the scene?
- What does this pivotal moment represent for the Carson family? How does it become yet another obstacle to overcome? What does Mrs. Carson decide to do?

Notice the emotional swing embedded in this scene. Ben is thrilled with the acknowledgment of his academic achievement, and then he is devastated by the heartless words of his teacher.

- **Have you experienced this type of peak-and-valley moment? What does that kind of experience do to your spirit and resolve? How does it impact you?**

The Bible amply addresses topics such as adversity and persecution. After all, Jesus Christ suffered the severest persecution for our sake. Yet, there is always hope – the Bible encourages us to persevere amidst adversity because there is something greater on the horizon.

Read **Matthew 5:11-12**, **Romans 8:18**, and **Hebrews 10:36** (see *Scriptures Referenced for the full text*) and think about how they relate to Ben, his family, and their circumstances. Also, consider why perseverance is such a prominent theme in the Bible and what it means that we need constant reminders to persevere.

Another obstacle that Ben has to overcome is his quick temper. It develops in elementary school, as a response to poor grades and the subsequent derision of his classmates. Unfortunately, it follows Ben to high school, and nearly costs him everything.

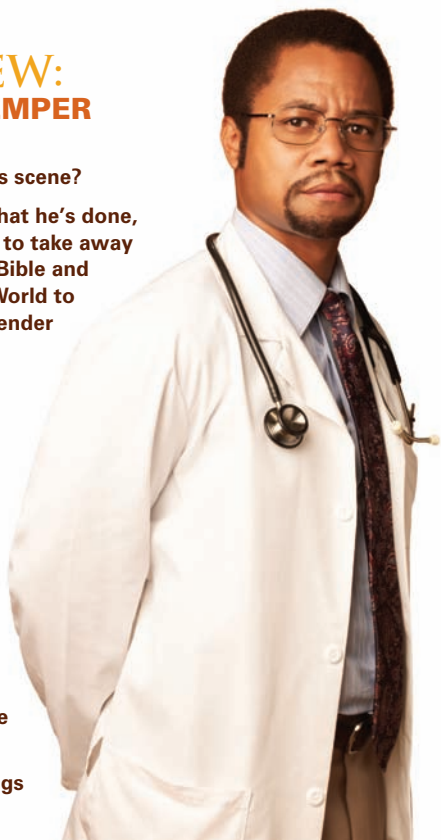
SCENE TO REVIEW: THE STRUGGLE WITH TEMPER

(00:41:49 – 00:43:54, CHAPTER 5)

- **How is God’s hand evident in this scene?**
- **As Ben realizes the severity of what he’s done, he flees home and begs the Lord to take away his temper. He then clutches his Bible and sings verses of “Jesus is All the World to Me.” Why is this moment of surrender so important?**
- **In what ways is Ben’s surrender a form of perseverance? How does it help him overcome the obstacle of temper in his life?**
- **What kind of man does Ben become? Is temper an issue in his adult life? What scenes or moments in the movie support your opinion?**

Read 1 **Chronicles 16:11** and **Psalms 37:23-24** (see *Scriptures Referenced*).

- **How do these verses relate to the concept of perseverance?**
- **The Lord can use our shortcomings**



to help us become what we're meant to be, to help us fulfill our purpose. How do the verses from Psalm 37 demonstrate this idea in relation to Ben and his temper?

- **What message can we take from these verses? What kind of hope do they offer?**

Having overcome the extreme adversity of his childhood, Ben graduates from college and pursues a career in neurosurgery. Unfortunately, one of Ben's first experiences as a resident at Johns Hopkins puts him under the authority of a doctor who decides that humiliation and prejudice are acceptable teaching tools.

SCENE TO REVIEW:

HOSPITAL ROUNDS (00:53:04 – 00:55:56, CHAPTER 6)

- **When Dr. Farmington admonishes Ben with such a blatantly racist remark, what is Ben's response (consider facial, physical, and verbal cues)?**
- **For a moment, Ben's temper begins to surface, but what ultimately happens?**
- **How does this scene represent another area in which Ben must prove his ability to overcome hardship? Is he successful? Why or why not?**

Despite the scene's ugliness, there is a beauty in the way Ben responds to adversity. Instead of quitting the program or allowing Dr. Farmington's vile attitude to otherwise interfere with his residency, Ben returns to work the next day, maintains his cheerful disposition, and even brings flowers to the nurses' station. In essence, he wonderfully demonstrates the power of **Luke 6:31** (*see Scriptures Referenced*).

Life, by its very nature, can be adversity prone. Sometimes, it seems like there is always a challenge or hardship just waiting to test our faith and resolve. Ben is certainly no stranger to this concept. It's interesting to note, though, that while some of the struggles he faces as an adult are very similar to what he faced as a child, some of the challenges are markedly different.

- **Compare and contrast the adversity of Ben's childhood to and with the adversity in his adult life. What are the similarities and differences?**
- **As Ben gets older, how does he cope with adversity? What does he do when faced with trials and difficult circumstances?**
- **How about yourself? When faced with difficult situations, how do you respond?**

2 Corinthians 12:10, James 1:12, and 1 Corinthians 9:24 (*see Scriptures Referenced*)

address the idea of overcoming adversity. Consider how they also relate to perseverance, and how we can trust that running the race marked out for us is worth it.

Read **James 1:2-4** (*see Scriptures Referenced*).

- **How do trials serve to develop perseverance? And what does it mean to be "mature and complete, not lacking anything"?**

As you conclude this theme discussion, think about the beauty of overcoming adversity. Think about the joy that follows hardship, and how God's promises are faithful and true.

RECOGNIZING & DEVELOPING GOD-GIVEN GIFTS

Guiding Scripture: Psalm 138:8 (NIV):
“The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me...”

SCRIPTURES REFERENCED:

- **Psalm 138:8 (NIV):** “The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me...”
- **Psalm 139:16 (NIV):** “...All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”
- **Romans 11:29 (NIV):** “For God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable.”
- **Romans 12:6-8 (NIV):** “We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.”
- **1 Corinthians 12:4 (NIV):** “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit.”
- **Ephesians 2:10 (NIV):** “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”
- **Colossians 3:23 (NIV):** “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.”
- **James 1:17 (NIV):** “Every good and



perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.”

DVD SCENES TO REVIEW

THE FIRST CALL (00:15:08 – 00:17:13, CHAPTER 2)

A WHOLE OTHER WORLD (00:29:35 – 00:31:34, CHAPTER 3)

UNIQUE GIFT (00:43:55 – 00:45:26, CHAPTER 5)

THE INTERVIEW (00:51:01 – 00:53:00, CHAPTER 6)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

There’s little doubt about it: God called Ben Carson to be a neurosurgeon. God also gave Ben exactly what he needed to achieve this calling. From a determined and encouraging mother to an intellect capable of amazing recall and all of the situations and circumstances in between, God provided Ben with a set of skills perfect for his life’s task.

SCENE TO REVIEW:

THE FIRST CALL (00:15:08 – 00:17:13, CHAPTER 2)

- **What is the significance of Ben using his imagination for the first time as he hears Pastor Ford’s story about the missionary doctor?**
- **In response to Ben’s enthusiasm over being a doctor someday, Mrs. Carson says, “You can be anything you want to be in this life, as long as you work at it.” Why is this comment important? What does it do for Ben and Curtis?**
- **Mrs. Carson also says, “God will not abandon you.” It’s almost a non sequitur – why does she finish the conversation with this remark?**
- **How does Mrs. Carson help Ben discover and develop his gifts? Think about and discuss specific moments in the movie in which God uses her to guide Ben.**

Some may argue that Ben’s church experience is less of a calling and more of a flight of fancy. But, it’s important not to dismiss the moments in life that evoke a response in us. Those moments can help us better understand our course and further direct us toward our purpose.

Read **Psalm 138:8** and **Romans 11:29** (*see Scriptures Referenced*).

- **How do these verses relate to Ben in his early years?**
- **Do these verses have meaning for your own life? If so, how?**

After Mrs. Carson stresses the importance of education and sets her children on that course, Ben’s intellect grows in unbelievable ways. It’s clear that he has a wonderfully gifted mind, and that his talents will someday lead to great things.

At one point on his educational journey, Ben experiences life through a new and different lens.

SCENE TO REVIEW: A WHOLE OTHER WORLD (00:29:35 – 00:31:34, CHAPTER 3)

- What does Ben see in the microscope? How does this encounter fit in with the events of Ben's life that lead him to a career in medicine?
- Why does Mr. Jaeck decide to show Ben the "whole other world" on the slide? What does he recognize in Ben that may not be as prominent in other students?
- How does Ben's experience in science class relate to the overall theme of recognizing and developing God-given gifts?
- When Mr. Jaeck says, "Someone unlocked the door," what does he mean?

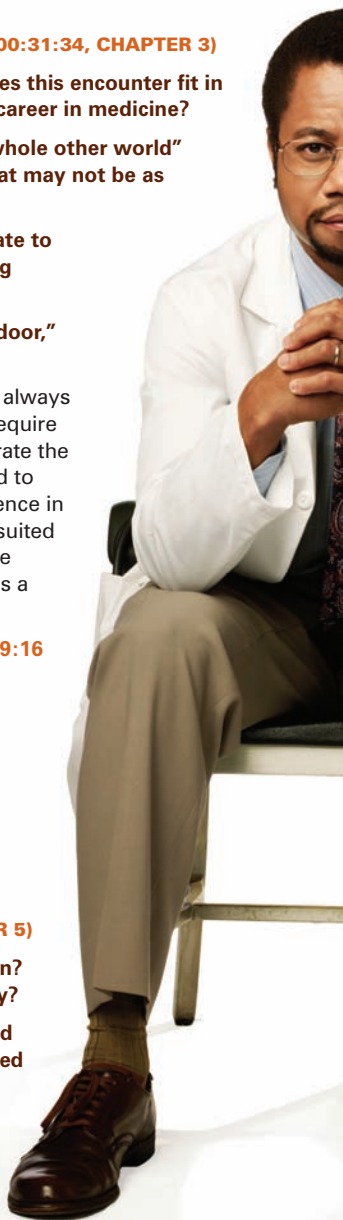
Recognizing and developing our God-given gifts isn't always something we can do on our own. The pursuit may require outside influence, and God can be trusted to orchestrate the events of our lives to lead us down the paths we need to take. First, Mrs. Carson recognizes ability and intelligence in her children. Later, Mr. Jaeck sees that Ben's mind is suited for scientific understanding, and through the influence of these two people and their perceptiveness, Ben has a better knowledge of his unique set of gifts.

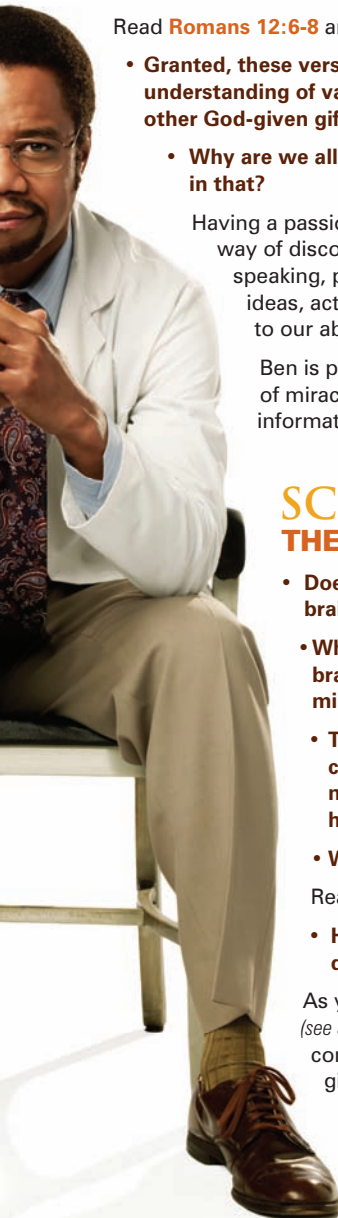
Take a moment to read **Ephesians 2:10** and **Psalms 139:16** (see *Scriptures Referenced*) and think about the concept of gifts.

In addition to having mental acuity, surgeons need something more. As one of Ben's medical school professors says, "You also need an incredible hand-eye coordination, which is a gift."

SCENE TO REVIEW: UNIQUE GIFT (00:43:55 – 00:45:26, CHAPTER 5)

- Does Ben have the gift of hand-eye coordination? If so, how does the film demonstrate this ability?
- In this scene, the professor says that he's dedicated his life to studying the brain, a task that has required sacrifice and dedication. Does Ben share this commitment to understanding the brain? If so, how is that commitment conveyed?



- 
- **Ben is drawn to activities and things that correspond to his talents – this is something that’s true for most of us. Think about Ben’s various gifts and discuss scenes in the movie that demonstrate how his interests coincide with his God-given abilities.**

Read **Romans 12:6-8** and 1 **Corinthians 12:4** (*see Scriptures Referenced*).

- **Granted, these verses speak to spiritual gifts, but how can our understanding of various spiritual gifts and abilities help us discover other God-given gifts?**
 - **Why are we all gifted differently? What might be the purpose in that?**

Having a passionate or vested interest in something is another way of discovering and developing God-given gifts. Generally speaking, people are drawn to certain things (hobbies, sports, ideas, activities) and those things can help to inform us as to our abilities.

Ben is passionate about the brain. He believes it’s capable of miraculous things, and he’s not afraid to share this information at his interview for the Johns Hopkins residency.

SCENE TO REVIEW: THE INTERVIEW (00:51:01 – 00:53:00, CHAPTER 6)

- **Does this scene capture Ben’s enthusiasm for the brain? If so, how?**
- **What do you think of Ben’s comments about the brain? Do you agree with his statements about its miraculous nature? Why or why not?**
- **The interviewing doctor remarks that Ben shows confidence, which is a necessary trait for a neurosurgeon. Is Ben confident? Is that another of his gifts?**
- **What does the movie’s title, *Gifted Hands*, suggest?**

Read **Colossians 3:23** (*see Scriptures Referenced*).

- **How might this verse apply to the recognition and development of gifts?**

As you complete this theme discussion, read **James 1:17** (*see Scriptures Referenced*) and reflect on the beautiful and constant nature of God in his wisdom to bestow gifts on us.

HAVING COURAGE IN THE FACE OF UNCERTAINTY

Guiding Scripture: **Joshua 1:9 (NIV):** *“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”*



SCRIPTURES REFERENCED:

- **Joshua 1:9 (NIV):** *“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”*
- **Psalms 27:1 (NIV):** *“The Lord is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid?”*
- **Psalms 31:24 (NIV):** *“Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the Lord.”*
- **Isaiah 26:3 (NIV):** *“You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you.”*
- **Isaiah 41:10 (NLT):** *“Don’t be afraid, for I am with you. Don’t be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand.”*
- **Jeremiah 17:7 (NIV):** *“But blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him.”*
- **Galatians 6:9 (NIV):** *“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.”*

- **Ephesians 6:10 (NIV):** “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.”
- **Hebrews 4:16 (NIV):** “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

DVD SCENES TO REVIEW

ILLEGAL SURGERY (00:55:57 – 00:58:22, CHAPTER 6)

THE HEMISPHERECTOMY

(00:58:23 – 01:05:37, CHAPTER 6)

AN EPIPHANY

(01:13:02 – 01:15:47, CHAPTER 8)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Surgeons must possess a great deal of courage. They face severely difficult situations on a regular basis, and their medical paths are often fraught with uncertainty – what the surgery may uncover, how a patient will respond, the long-term effects of a procedure, and many more other challenges.

As depicted in the movie, Ben faces a few uncertainties of his own, and he must find the strength as a surgeon to make the right choices where patients are concerned. One such example of Ben’s courage comes at the worst time – when every attending neurosurgeon is unavailable and Ben must choose between his career and a man’s life.

SCENE TO REVIEW: ILLEGAL SURGERY

(00:55:57 – 00:58:22, CHAPTER 6)

- In this scene, what is the uncertainty that Ben faces? How does he demonstrate courage in the face of an unknown outcome?



- Before going into surgery, Ben prays, “Thy will be done. Amen.” What does this brief prayer (and the act of praying itself) say about Ben’s character?
- Dr. Udvarhelyi tells Ben: “I congratulate you on taking the proper course of action in spite of its consequences.” This encouragement follows on the heels of a necessary admonishment, but what does Dr. Udvarhelyi’s statement mean for Ben?

Read **Jeremiah 17:7** and **Hebrews 4:16** (see *Scriptures Referenced*).

- How do these verses relate to the “Illegal Surgery” scene?
- Both of these verses use the word “confidence.” How does confidence relate to courage? How can we place our confidence in God during uncertain times?

Soon after Ben makes the tough, but correct, decision to operate on the injured man without the guidance of an attending physician, he faces another difficult situation – whether to proceed with a hemispherectomy, a surgery that could potentially paralyze a young girl.

SCENE TO REVIEW: THE HEMISPHERECTOMY

(00:58:23 – 01:05:37, CHAPTER 6)

- What would it feel like to have the knowledge to help the young patient, but to have never performed the very surgery she needs?
- What uncertainty do the parents face? What about Ben’s reservations? How do the parents and Ben act courageously in this scene?
- Read **Isaiah 26:3** (see *Scriptures Referenced*). Think about this verse and discuss it in relation to Ben’s commitment to prayer (i.e. when he’s kneeling at his bedside).

Take a moment to read **Galatians 6:9** and **Isaiah 41:10** (see *Scriptures Referenced*).

- What do these verses say about courage?





- **Isaiah 41:10** records a command from God: “Don’t be afraid.” Even though the book of Isaiah was written and recorded under specific circumstances, how can we honor this command? Why would God desire that we be unafraid?

The end of the film provides the bookend for the opening scene. At the beginning of the film, Ben struggles to find a solution that will prevent craniopagus twins from bleeding out during the intense separation surgery. At the end of the film, he realizes he may have stumbled upon the answer, but he has to battle some uncertainty in order to prevail.

SCENE TO REVIEW:

AN EPIPHANY (01:13:02 – 01:15:47, CHAPTER 8)

- **Put yourself in Ben’s shoes. As you face the prospect of separating the twins, what’s going through your mind? How does uncertainty play a role in your choices?**
 - **Even though Ben won’t express what’s bothering him, his mother will. According to Mrs. Carson, what is preventing Ben from finding an answer?**
 - **At times, we need to find courage through the encouragement of others. How does Mrs. Carson serve Ben in this way?**
 - **Ben’s personal tragedy (the loss of his own twin babies) is heartbreaking. What must he do to find the courage to help the West German twins?**

Read **Joshua 1:9**, **Psalms 31:24**, and **Ephesians 6:10** (see *Scriptures Referenced*).

Notice how each one encourages us to be strong. Think about the power of finding courage and strength in God.

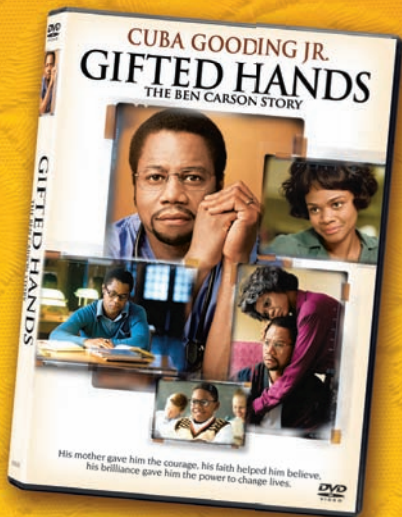
As a final note on the theme of courage, consider the wisdom of King David, who wrote, “The Lord is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid?” (**Psalm 27:1 [NIV]**).

INSPIRATIONAL. POWERFUL. TRUE.

The Remarkable Story About A Man Who Changed Medicine Forever.

Academy Award® winner **Cuba Gooding Jr.** (Actor in a Supporting Role, *Jerry Maguire*, 1996) stars in the inspiring true story of world-renowned pediatric neurosurgeon, Dr. Ben Carson, whose own struggle to overcome poverty and learning problems inspired him to treat impoverished children from all over the world, earning him the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Based on the best-selling autobiography!

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