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Introduction

These free resources provided by Damaris Media are designed to help churches and individuals think through the issues raised by *Ben-Hur* (in UK cinemas from the 7th September 2016).

Starting out with a discussion of the film to get the group talking, the guide moves through to deeper questions and activities around themes of faith, hope and redemption. It finishes with suggestions for reflection and prayer.

In this leader’s guide you’ll find:

- Background information
- Discussion questions
- Activities, reflection and prayer

There are also special video features, which are available at benhur.damarismedia.com.

*Please feel free to use whichever parts of this guide you feel are most appropriate for your group.*

View the trailer/Before the film

Watch the trailer for *Ben-Hur* (available at benhur.damarismedia.com) with your group to get people excited about the forthcoming cinema trip.

1. What is your impression of the film’s characters and its story?
2. If you have seen the classic 1959 *Ben-Hur*, starring Charlton Heston, how do you think this new movie might compare?
3. What are you most looking forward to about the cinema trip?

You could *share the trailer* on social media to encourage others to join your trip - see benhur.damarismedia.com
What's the Story?

*Ben-Hur* is a major Paramount Pictures and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures film releasing in cinemas everywhere on 7th September 2016. Bursting with action - including a new chariot race for the ages - and elevated by Christian themes of faith, hope and redemption, it tells the classic story of Judah Ben-Hur (Jack Huston), a prince falsely accused of treason by his adopted brother Messala (Toby Kebbell), an officer in the Roman army. Stripped of his title and separated from his family and the woman he loves (Nazanin Boniadi), Judah is forced into slavery and despair.

After years at sea, working as a slave, a breathtaking turn of events sends Judah on an epic journey back to his homeland to seek revenge. But the presence of Jesus of Nazareth (Rodrigo Santoro) in his life begins to transform him, leading him to discover grace, mercy and ultimately, redemption. The film is based on Lew Wallace’s timeless novel, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* and also stars Morgan Freeman in an unforgettable performance.

New Ben-Hur Novel

The official tie-in novel to the upcoming major motion picture *Ben-Hur*, from Paramount Pictures and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures (MGM), is being released in July 2016. Carol Wallace, great-great-granddaughter of the original writer Lew Wallace, has taken the old-fashioned prose of this classic novel and breathed new life into it for today’s audience. She has modernized the text, bringing this story of intrigue, romance, faith and tragedy into a more accessible and readable format - drawing readers back to this time-honored tale.

Published by Lion Fiction.
ISBN 9781782642237.
Background

‘Charlton Heston’s *Ben-Hur* is one of my all-time favorites,’ says Executive Producer Mark Burnett. ‘As much as that film means to me and so many others, my own teenagers had never heard of it. I realized there was a massive audience ready for a fresh approach to this classic story.’

Director Timur Bekmambetov (*Wanted, Night Watch*) was excited to be a part of the project. ‘The 1959 *Ben-Hur* is not just a film, it’s a phenomenon that greatly affected the culture of the 20th century,’ he explains. ‘Even though the setting and the circumstances are thousands of years ago, the characters’ emotions and actions are relatable and have a modern, universal resonance.’

Screenwriter John Ridley reflects that Judah Ben-Hur is a ‘classic character’ who existed 80 years prior to the 1959 film, having originated in Lew Wallace’s book *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*. ‘He’s a wronged man seeking revenge and redemption. Compelling characters like Ben-Hur and Messala are the reason we can return to these stories again and again.’ His fellow screenwriter Keith R. Clarke was inspired by the story’s powerful message. ‘One of the last sentences Christ spoke was “Father, forgive them for they know not what they've done.” So much tragedy in the world can be averted by forgiving our enemies.’

*Ben-Hur* stars Jack Huston as Judah Ben-Hur, ‘a character combining aristocratic irony and ability to truly care for other people’, with Toby Kebbell as Judah’s adopted brother Messala.
Film Chat

What’s the first thing we all like to do when we leave the cinema? Talk about the film, of course! This is your chance to chat about your reaction to Ben-Hur as a cinematic experience before you start digging deeper into the themes.

You might want to play the film trailer, available at benhur.damarismedia.com, to refresh your memory.

1. What were you expecting Ben-Hur to be like, and did anything about the film surprise you? How much did you know about the story going in?
2. What did you think of the casting of the film? Which performances stood out for you and why?
3. How did the film create a sense of time and place? What did you think of the locations and set design?
4. What did you think of the action scenes? Which parts of the film had you on the edge of your seat?
5. How did you feel about the way in which the film ended? How would you describe your mood when you left the cinema?
6. How did you react to the role that faith played in the story? In what ways did the film challenge or inspire you in your own faith?
Activities and Questions

**Icebreaker:** A firm foundation?

**You’ll need:** A big pack of straws, some tape.

Judah’s life at the beginning of *Ben-Hur* seems secure, but does it really have a firm foundation? This quick game will get the group warmed up before delving into the film’s themes of faith, hope and redemption.

Split the group into teams of two or three and give each team a bundle of 50 straws and a roll of tape. The groups have five minutes to build the tallest possible free-standing structure. You may just find that the winning team spends time on their foundation before going for height!
Part 1: Faith

Questions

1. What impression do we get of Judah when we meet him at the beginning of the film? What privileges does he enjoy, and what attitude does he have towards life?

2. How did you feel about the appearance of Jesus as a character at key moments in the film? What impact do these moments have on you as a viewer? What did you think of the way that Jesus was portrayed?

3. Why do you think Esther is more willing to put her faith in Jesus than Judah is? In your view, what factors might shape a person’s first response to Jesus? How might Jesus’s words about the rich man in Matthew 19 apply to Judah when we first meet him?

Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘I tell you the truth, it is very hard for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. I’ll say it again— it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!’ Matthew 19:23-24

Activity: In conversation with God

You’ll need: A large sheet of paper, coloured pens.

What does it mean to live our lives in conversation with God? Divide the sheet of paper with a vertical line. Encourage everyone in the group to think about a time when they’ve spoken to God and received some kind of response.

In writing, or using pictures, fill the left-hand side of the paper with what each member of the group said to God, and how they said it – whether through thoughts, feelings, words or actions. On the other side, write or draw what they sensed him saying in return – whether through the Bible, through a friend, through circumstances, or through some other means. By the end, you should have a poster representing some of the main ways that God can interact with us in our lives.
Part 2: Hope

Questions

1. Judah’s life is turned upside down in an instant after he is wrongly accused and betrayed by Messala. What emotions might you have experienced in his place? In your view, is Judah’s downfall entirely Messala’s fault?

2. How did you react to the scenes showing Judah’s time as a slave and an exile? How does this experience change him as a person?

3. Judah tells Esther that it was hatred for Messala that sustained him during his ordeal. Is there anything else that he could have held on to? What might determine whether somebody reaches for hope or hate during times of suffering?

4. What promises are Christians given to hold on to in difficult times? Are there any Bible verses which became particularly important to you during a tough experience? What is unique about the hope which Jesus offers?

‘So I became hate. And that’s what kept me alive.’ Judah

‘We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.’ Romans 5:3-5
**Activity:** Hope in suffering  
**You’ll need:** A smartphone, tablet or computer; access to the internet; Bibles.

In the Bible, and throughout history, there have been many examples of people whose faith in God enabled them to keep hope alive during times of suffering. These include historical figures such as William Tyndale, Horatio Spafford and Corrie ten Boom, and biblical examples such as Paul, David and the prophetess Anna.

Encourage each member of your group to choose one of these figures, or a person of their own choice, and then to spend five minutes or so looking them up online or in the Bible. (They may want to think of a contemporary figure rather than a historical or biblical example.) Then share with the rest of the group:

- What kind of difficulty did this person experience in their life?
- How were they sustained by their faith in God?
- How does their faith and hope inspire you personally?
Part 3: Redemption

Questions

1. How were you expecting Judah and Messala’s relationship to be resolved at the end of the film? Did you feel satisfied with the eventual outcome? What do you imagine might happen to them, and to the other characters, after the credits roll?

2. What impact does witnessing Jesus’s crucifixion have on Judah and why? What are some of his other personal turning points? How has he changed by the end of the film?

3. What does the film suggest might be the consequences of trying to even the score we’ve been wronged? How do we see these consequences playing out in our world and in our own lives? What might make it possible for us to choose a different path?

4. How does forgiveness bring new hope into Judah’s life? What role does forgiveness play in the new life that Jesus offers all of us?

Reflect

‘Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.”’ Luke 23:34

During a time of quiet, encourage the group to reflect on a time when forgiveness has changed their lives: whether because they were forgiven or because they committed to forgiving someone else. How did forgiveness bring new life and hope into the situation? How did Jesus’s death on the cross shape their attitude towards forgiveness and reconciliation?

After a few minutes, people can share their stories if appropriate.

Pray

You might want to close your meeting with this suggested prayer or something similar.

Dear God, thank you for the powerful story of this film, and the message it carries. Thank you that we’ve been able to spend time sharing and reflecting on it together.

Please show us how to live our lives in conversation with you and to hold on to the hope you offer even during times of struggle. Remind us of the amazing power of your forgiveness, and give us the strength to turn away from hatred when it comes to the people who have wronged us.

In your name, Amen.

Please find a poster opposite and invitations overleaf for you to use in your publicity.
In cinemas September 7

BEN-HUR

FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT. FINISH THE RACE.

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Join us for a cinema trip, followed by conversation and fun

benhur.damarismedia.com