

FOCUS  FAMILY  
RESOURCES

# MOVIE NIGHTS<sup>TM</sup> FOR TEENS

25 More Movies to Spark Spiritual  
Discussions with Your Teen

Bob Smithouser from *Plugged In*<sup>®</sup> Magazine



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*Movie Nights for Teens*

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## Introduction

# Enjoying Parent-Teen Dates with a Purpose

*“Movies are the highest popular art of our time, and art has the ability to change lives.”*—Horror novelist Stephen King<sup>1</sup>

No matter how you feel about Stephen King and his macabre brand of fiction, the author makes an excellent point. The questions then become: Which movies do your teenagers watch? And what sort of change is taking place, both *in* young viewers and *through* them?

The good news is that you can shape the answers to those questions. This book will help. Designed as a complement to the original *Movie Nights*, *Movie Nights for Teens* features films carefully selected for their ability to lead you and your adolescent into new arenas of discussion and discovery. Since more than half of these titles have been released since 2000, the stories and stars are sure to resonate with young people. Even if they’ve seen the movies before, experiencing them as part of a Movie Night guarantees they’ll never see them the same way again. Before we get to the movies themselves, let’s take a fresh look at why it makes sense to turn Hollywood’s best efforts into enjoyable parent-teen dates with a purpose.

## The Persuasive Power of Film

Anyone who has ever left the cinema excited, angry, inspired, or choking back tears knows that movies aren’t “just entertainment.” They can touch us deeply . . . for better or for worse. How deeply? In 2003, young

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fans rushed out to buy clown fish like the ones in *Finding Nemo*. Then, in an attempt to set their pets free, a merciful misinformed minority imitated a scene from the movie and flushed them down the toilet.<sup>2</sup> Earlier that year a more tragic headline told of a teenager who drowned when he and his friends tried to copy a dangerous underwater training sequence from the surfing movie *Blue Crush*.<sup>3</sup>

Adults take cues from the big screen too. When the Jack Nicholson film *About Schmidt* mentioned a nonprofit humanitarian group by name, child sponsorships shot up from three per day to 80 per day.<sup>4</sup> And immediately following the release of *Sideways*, restaurants saw a disproportionate increase in requests for the main character's wine of choice. Sommelier Rob Bigelow said, "The impact of the movie on sales is huge. It's almost as though it's introducing people to Pinot Noir."<sup>5</sup>

Those are just a few sobering reminders that we need to teach teens to process film through a Christian filter. The following statements from industry insiders should inspire us to double our efforts:

- "The role of the artist is manipulation. We're moving into a post-literate world." —Actor/producer Ron Silver<sup>6</sup>
- "When you make a film you keep people captive for two hours and if you have nothing to say, or the wrong thing to say, it can have a really negative impact." —Actress Reese Witherspoon, star of *Legally Blonde* and *Sweet Home Alabama*<sup>7</sup>
- "I remember as a kid seeing *Rocky*. When it was done I walked out of the theater and thought, 'Man, I want to fight someone now.' I felt that juiced up." —*Clueless* co-star Paul Rudd<sup>8</sup>
- "I equate movies, in a visceral kind of way, to either sex or drugs. You're getting high. Or you're being turned on." —Quentin Tarantino, director of *Kill Bill* and *Pulp Fiction*<sup>9</sup>

Why do movies leave that kind of mark, sometimes without our even knowing we've been branded? Because there's something inherently powerful about stories. That's why Jesus used parables to teach important lessons to His disciples.

For example, in Matthew 7:24-27 Jesus could have said, "The world is unstable. Follow me." Short and to the point. Ready to move on to the next lesson. That's probably how we tend to instruct our own children, which elicits little more than a grunt and a nod. But not the Lord. Instead, Jesus told a story about two aspiring home owners who built

their houses on different foundations. The wise man chose rock. The foolish man trusted in sand to support his abode. Jesus proceeded to describe a storm that buffeted both structures. One stood up to the elements. The other fell. He concluded this brief but substantial analogy by comparing Himself to the solid rock that served as the wise man’s starting point. In just four sentences Christ crafted a plot, characters, conflict, and a moral to the story. It captivated His audience at an emotional level, which is what makes any message stick.

That doesn’t mean we have to script a one-act play for every moral we want our teens to internalize. It should, however, encourage us to look for teachable moments in well-crafted stories—including movies. Robert K. Johnston agrees, and adds a sense of urgency. The professor of theology and culture at Fuller Theological Seminary believes using contemporary parables to explore issues of faith is critical if we don’t want to lose the next generation. “Film, especially for those under 35, is the medium through which we get our primary stories, our myths, our read on reality. . . . As the culture has moved from a modern to a postmodern era, we have moved from wanting to understand truth rationally to understanding truth as it’s embedded in story.”<sup>10</sup>



CALVIN AND HOBBS © 1993 Watterson. Dist. by UNIVERSAL PRESS SYNDICATE. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.

## Preparing Teens for the Road Ahead

Clearly, we need to help teens grow in their ability to process movies. Which ones? That’s up to you. The titles in this book, while not officially endorsed by Focus on the Family, are a decent place to start. Keep in mind that every child is different. Family standards can vary, even

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among Christians. And a few of these films probably should be reserved for older teens (as noted in the “Cautions” section of each).

One of the great challenges of parenting is striking the delicate balance between *protecting* a child from the culture and *preparing* her to evaluate and engage it from a biblical perspective. When my children were in preschool, 90 percent of my job as a screener of DVDs involved protecting. They got very used to hearing the word “no.” As they matured and their cognitive skills developed, I remained a protector but found myself in “preparing mode” a bit more often. That will increase as we move into the teen years. As parents steer their children toward independence, we should control their choices less and step up the sort of interaction that will prepare them to *own* those decisions as responsible adults. That takes discernment (see Appendix III). It also takes practice. The best way to encourage good habits is to ride shotgun with them for as long as we can.

Speaking of riding shotgun, you wouldn’t fork over the car keys and let your daughter drive alone on the interstate her first time behind the wheel. You start out slowly, perhaps in an empty parking lot. Once she has a feel for the vehicle and you’ve coached her on the basics, you venture onto a deserted back road. Then, confident she’ll keep it between the lines, you try a slightly busier part of town. She develops confidence and experience with you in the passenger seat, making for a smoother transition when she’s ready to go solo.

And so it is with media discernment. We know our children will someday travel through the culture alone. It’s part of growing up. They’ll attend movies and rent DVDs without us. Will they make their choices based on Philippians 4:8 and Psalm 101:3, or will they rely on a cool TV commercial, peer pressure, or the sales pitch printed on the back of the DVD case? That depends on the investment you make now. By discussing healthy boundaries and dissecting good films together while they’re still at home, you can give them the confidence, experience, motivation, and practical tools necessary to make wise choices for life.

As you get ready to teach teens how to process and apply positive Hollywood parables, don’t forget the four Ps:

*Preview* – It’s always wise to view a film yourself before using it in a Movie Night setting. Along with the “Cautions” section, this preview will help you gauge age-appropriateness, prepare you for any questionable scenes, and give you a leg up on the discussion material.

*Pray* – Before and after the preview, ask God to be part of the process. Pray for wisdom to know if and how you should use that particular movie. The Lord knows your teen’s heart better than you do. Ask Him to guide your discussion for maximum benefit.

*Predict* – Anticipate how the film might connect with your teenager. Be sensitive to ways specific scenes or lines of dialogue could hit close to home.

*Protect* – Remember that each Movie Night is an exclusive date between you and your teen. Plan ahead to limit interruptions. Turn off your cell phones. Get the rest of the family occupied elsewhere. Make it the sole activity for the evening so that neither of you is in a hurry to wrap things up in order to do something else.



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## Help Them Develop Self-Awareness

In addition to gaining a deeper understanding of the world around them, teens taught to see beneath the surface of movies will develop a better understanding of themselves—their thoughts, their feelings, why films appeal to them as they do.

*Spider-Man* revived the comic book superhero genre when it swung into theaters in the summer of 2002. Informal exit polls of teens asking what they liked about the movie typically drew comments about its amazing special effects, wild action, interesting story, or how well it was adapted for the screen. Pretty superficial stuff.

Imagine a 15-year-old boy depositing his popcorn bag in a nearby trash can before announcing to the pollster, “I identified with the movie because it’s essentially a fantasy about a bullied teen who’s allowed to transcend his circumstances with the help of cool superpowers. Kids like



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me aren't great athletes. The cute girls don't notice us. Deep down we all wish we could be transformed overnight. But get this: Even after being empowered, the hero still struggled with social acceptance. He proved you can climb walls, spin webs, be really strong, and *still* have issues. Dude, I can relate to that!"

It's safe to say independent research firms hired by Columbia Pictures weren't hearing much of that. Still, adolescent audiences were feeling it. They may not have been aware of it or able to articulate it, but those themes connected with them just the same. Maybe that's one reason the *Spider-Man* franchise has succeeded while most of the superhero flicks that swung into theaters on its heels failed. Young people want a hero they can identify with. We just need to help them understand the connection. The same teens who take great pride in accessing the deepest levels of a video game can, with the help of a loving parent and a cinematic parable, do the same with their own thoughts and emotions.

### Armed to Engage a Postmodern World

Beyond teaching teens how to deconstruct movies and understand themselves better, Movie Nights can also inspire them to share the gospel in unique, culturally relevant ways.

In his book *Basic Christianity*, Reverend John Stott mourned, "The great tragedy in the church today is that evangelicals are biblical, but not contemporary, while liberals are contemporary, but not biblical. We need faithfulness to the ancient word and sensitivity to the modern world."<sup>11</sup> The apostle Paul understood that balancing act. While in Athens he addressed a council named for Ares, the Greek god of war. Without compromising the gospel, Paul used an inscription from a local pagan altar ("To an Unknown God") as a jumping-off point to tell the council about the God who *can* be known (Acts 17:16–34). Paul even quoted their poets back to them (v. 28) before calling the people to repentance and telling them about Christ's resurrection.

Teens can do the same today if they learn to deconstruct film, hold the pieces up to the light of biblical truth, and apply them in a meaningful way. All truth is God's truth, whether or not the artist acknowledges the source. Take advantage of good art. Your teen knows classmates who might never set foot inside a church but would gladly discuss a movie over Tater Tots in the high school cafeteria.

Meanwhile, being able to build a scriptural bridge to film will allow your teen to defend himself against “hollow and deceptive philosophy” (Colossians 2:8), help him resist being “conformed to the pattern of this world” (Romans 12:2), and equip him to “demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5).

### Parental Guidance

You’re almost ready to launch into a Movie Night experience. But before you do, have you found yourself asking any of these questions?

#### **I’ve always wondered how movies get their ratings. Who determines what label a film should receive?**

The ratings are assigned by an anonymous board of 12 parents living in Southern California. This panel is selected and monitored by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), which pays members an undisclosed sum for a tour of duty that averages about four years. The job is simple. They sit in a private screening room, scribble notes, and discuss what they saw. Each intuitively decides the age-appropriateness of a given film and casts a written vote for a particular rating. Majority rules. That’s pretty much it.

Sometimes a producer or studio will appeal the rating. They can’t talk to the board directly, but rather through an MPAA executive who explains the reason for the ruling. Then the filmmaker has the option of editing the movie to secure a less severe rating. As a result, Hollywood has learned to work the system. That usually involves trimming an R picture just enough to get it a more financially lucrative PG-13. One criticism of the ratings board is that, because it doesn’t have concrete criteria for assigning specific labels, filmmakers rely heavily on precedent and are finding new ways to get away with edgy content. The ratings G, PG, PG-13, and R give families a helpful starting point, but it’s hard to trust a system proven to be subjective, arbitrary, and full of loopholes.<sup>12</sup> Film critic Steven Greydanus warns, “Parents shouldn’t count on the MPAA system to do their job for them. No matter what the rating is, parental guidance is *always* required.”<sup>13</sup>

So, how was this imperfect system born? After abolishing the conservative Hays Production Code (deemed too restrictive for the social evolution

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of the mid-1960s), MPAA President Jack Valenti replaced it with the modern ratings system. It has evolved since 1968 but its purpose remains the same: Even more than a tool to inform parents, it is Hollywood's attempt to regulate itself, giving filmmakers artistic freedom while avoiding government censorship. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised. The MPAA has always been the industry's lobbying arm, made up of the seven major Hollywood studios and the National Association of Theater Owners.

To learn more about the priorities and inner workings of the MPAA, starting with its ratings system, visit [mpaa.org/movieratings/about/content.htm#1](http://mpaa.org/movieratings/about/content.htm#1). If you want more detailed information about the content of specific films (what those ratings *don't* tell you), go to Focus on the Family's entertainment review site, [pluggedinonline.com](http://pluggedinonline.com).

### **Are there general questions I could ask that would apply to any movie?**

Absolutely. In addition to the ones featured in the "Talking Points" section of each Movie Night, you can refer back to this list at any time:

- Which character did you admire most? Why?
- Do the themes in this movie reflect reality? Do they reflect *truth*?
- How do the morals onscreen compare with the values you've been taught at home, in school, or in church?
- Do you think movies like this have any effect on how close you feel to your family, friends, or God? Explain.
- How might you imagine God reacting to this movie? Why? Would you feel comfortable if Jesus sat here watching it with you? (See Matthew 28:20.)
- In addition to God's opinion of the movie, does the movie have an opinion of God? What is it?
- What would happen if you imitated the lifestyles or choices of the characters? Do consequences reflect those in the real world?
- What would you say is the main point of this movie? Do you agree or disagree with it?

### **My daughter is 10. How young is too young to start using movies as a teaching tool?**

That depends on the movie. A handful of the titles in this book, such as *My Dog Skip*, *Spellbound*, and *The Incredibles*, might be perfect for you right now. Your family may want to wait a few years and "grow into" others. Furthermore, there may be some you never feel completely

comfortable with. That's fine, too. Families are different, and not all films will be a good fit in every home. The important thing is to find age-appropriate movies and start children developing critical thinking skills as soon as possible.

How young is too young? I remember watching Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* with my three-year-old daughter. If you've seen that film you may recall the first big musical number. Villagers exchange opinions of Belle while the sweet girl strolls through the streets, imagining a world beyond her provincial town. Gaston, a conceited lout, tells his sidekick he plans to marry Belle because she's "the most beautiful girl in town. That makes her the best." I hit pause. My little girl was not about to grow up thinking that physical beauty is the measuring stick by which women should be measured. Rather than ripping the tape out of the VCR, I made eye contact with her and calmly said, "Sweetie, Gaston is wrong. Belle is the best because she has a good heart. Being pretty is just a bonus." I gave her a kiss and got a smile in return. Not sure how deeply it would sink in, I pressed play and we enjoyed the rest of the movie.

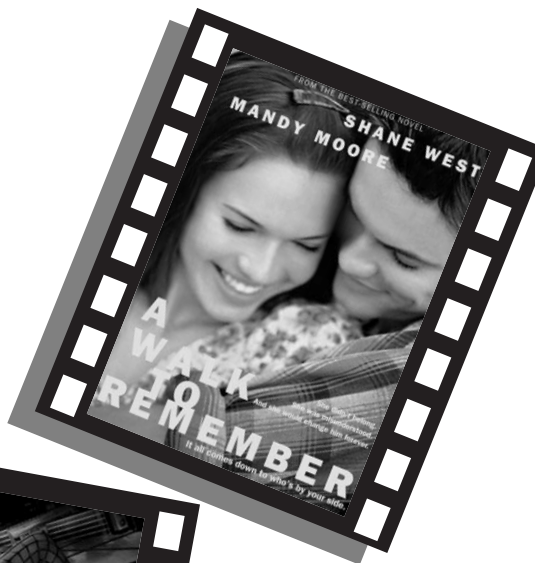
I'm happy to report that it did sink in. We also owned the soundtrack. Consequently, that same song commonly played during tea parties and puzzle time. Over the next few years, every time the line came on, Shelby would look up from whatever she was doing and say quietly, "No, Daddy, it's her *heart*," grinning as though we shared a precious secret.

My children are older now, but still not mature enough for the films featured in *Movie Nights for Teens*. Until they are, we're enjoying the ones highlighted in *Movie Nights for Kids*, which could give you a good head start as well.



Finally, Movie Nights are intended to be enjoyable dates for you and your teen—the key word being *enjoyable*. Yes, we want to teach teens to look beneath the surface at what movies are really saying. Yes, we want to extract positive values from films and apply them to our lives. Yes, we want to help young people understand the concept of biblical discernment and establish healthy criteria for renting videos. And yes, we even want to figure out ways to use movies to share eternal truths with the world around us. But the primary goal is for you and your teen to share a good time together. Pop the popcorn, ice the drinks, and have fun at the movies!

# THE MOVIES



# Anna and the King

**Rated:** PG-13

**Themes:** Courage, slavery, respecting authority, appreciating diverse cultures, justice vs. grace, monogamy, betrayal, overcoming loss, friendship, differences between Christianity and Buddhism

**Running Time:** 2 hours, 27 minutes

**Starring:** Jodi Foster as Anna Leonowens; Chow Yun-Fat as King Mongkut; Tom Felton as Louis; Bai Ling as Tuptim

**Directed by:** Andy Tennant



## Cautions

This true story contains mature themes and a few intense scenes best reserved for older teens and adults. While it doesn't promote Buddhism, the pervasiveness of Eastern religious idols and ideals warrants discussion. Dialogue alludes to the king's many wives and concubines. The film's most jarring moments, however, are violent ones. Victims of political unrest hang from trees. A man is shot in the head at close range. Others are shot during military or guerrilla attacks. A group of soldiers is poisoned. The most tense, disturbing scene involves a public beheading (avoid the worst of it by tuning out for 1:40 after Anna's Bible falls to the floor).



## Story Summary

After spending most of her life in colonial India, British widow Anna Leonowens and her young son Louis head to Siam at the behest of King Mongkut to teach his eldest son English and instruct him in the ways of the West. They arrive in Bangkok in 1862

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carrying luggage, a Bible, and an air of British superiority. Mother and son get a cool reception. It seems that, with England flexing its muscles around the world, some Siamese fear encroachment by the very empire she represents.

Meanwhile, Mongkut perpetuates a dynasties-old tradition of haughty chauvinism and imperious intimidation, and views Western education as a necessary evil. He rules a country steeped in Buddhism. He shares the royal palace with 23 wives, 42 concubines, and 58 children. Subjects fall prostrate in his presence. So how will he handle being challenged by a strong-willed Englishwoman who, despite wanting to show respect, runs roughshod over Siamese protocol and bristles at social injustice? Not well at first. In fact, Mongkut rewards Anna's effrontery with the assignment to educate his *entire* brood.

Their tempestuous start slowly gives way to mutual admiration. He's not the tyrant she first imagined him to be. And Anna models strength, intelligence, and wisdom, whether disciplining insolent children, defending an unjustly treated bondservant, or organizing a diplomatic dinner and defusing an awkward moment. During that event Mongkut honors her with a dance. It makes an impression—politically and personally. But any progress made between Anna and the king takes a devastating hit when Mongkut sends star-crossed lovers to their deaths in an attempt to save face. It seems his newest wife, Tuptim (given by her father), was so heartbroken at being torn from her true love that she snuck off to her soul mate's monastery, disguising herself as a Buddhist priest to be near him. Their public execution convinces Anna that she doesn't belong in Siam.

Lest viewers assume that *Anna and the King* is all about romance, it's not. The crux of the story involves political unrest, treachery, and a plot to destroy the royal family. Since Burma is a British protectorate, the fact that Burmese death squads have been attacking Siamese merchants and





villages has Mongkut and his advisors worried. Retaliation could invite war with Britain. Still, something must be done. A traitor in their midst sets a plan in motion to intentionally thrust Siam into war and unseat Mongkut from the throne.

The trap is sprung after Anna has left for the docks. The best Mongkut can hope to do is create a deception that will buy him time to hide his children. The king's servant urges Anna to return and care for the little ones. She agrees. Cornered, Mongkut rides out to confront his enemies in what he realizes could be a suicide mission to preserve the royal line. But sharp wits and a lot of gunpowder save the day. Anna's and Mongkut's deep affection for one another leads to one last dance before she departs for England. He tells her that, until now, he could never understand how "a man could be satisfied with only one woman."

In a final voice-over the grown prince recalls, "Anna had shined such a light on Siam." Indeed, Anna Leonowens's influence led Mongkut's heir to abolish slavery, reform the judicial system, and institute religious freedom. This Christian woman's assignment wasn't to evangelize a Buddhist nation. Even so, her courageous, wise, loving example gained the respect of its leaders and created openness to Christian thought.



### Before You Watch

Much like Anna Leonowens, the prophet Daniel found himself—by his wisdom, spiritual integrity, and noble example—influencing a nation that didn't worship God. During your family devotional time, study snapshots from his life chronicled in Daniel 1-2 and 5:29-6:28. We may never find ourselves attempting to gain royal favor through uncompromising lifestyle evangelism, but we still must submit to teachers, bosses, and others in authority who can be inspired to see Jesus Christ differently by actions that speak louder than words.



### Bible Bookmarks

Dan. 1-2, 5:29-6:28; Rom. 5:15-20, 8:16-18, 13:1; Jn. 3:16-18, 16:33; Ps. 22:24, 34:19; 2 Cor. 1:3-11; 1 Kgs. 11:1-13; Matt. 5:14-16



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### Talking Points

1. How do Anna's early struggles exemplify what missionaries face entering a foreign culture? Apply Romans 13:1. Can Christians armed with eternal truth project an air of arrogance and superiority, just as Anna did about being British? In what ways? What "foreign culture" could you influence right where you live? How can witnessing Anna's maturity help us to, first and foremost, love people where they are?
2. Read about Solomon's harem and idolatry in 1 Kings 11:1-13. Compare his behavior to King Mongkut's. Was one more right than the other? Discuss the challenge, when trying to reach the lost, of loving sinners without giving the impression that God approves of their lifestyle.
3. Buddhists conclude that "all life is suffering." How does the personal, loving God of the Bible want us to view suffering? Read Psalm 22:24 and 34:19, 2 Corinthians 1:3-11, Romans 8:16-18, and John 16:33. Has the Lord comforted you amid pain? How?
4. Why are slavery and other forms of oppression no big deal to a society that believes "all life is suffering"? What fundamental beliefs in America are reflected in how we treat each other?
5. What did Anna mean when she told the prince, "Most people don't see the world the way it is; they see it as *they* are"? How should Christians view the world . . . and themselves?
6. Mongkut realized that monogamy is better than a revolving door of sexual encounters with numerous partners. How does that testify to the fact that God designed sex for *intimacy*, not mere recreation? Do people still fail to grasp that truth? How? What are some consequences?
7. Louis and the prince get off to a rough start, but manage to become friends. What caused conflict early in their relationship? How do you think they overcame it? Have you ever made a friend out of an enemy? Do you need to?
8. During Anna's science experiment she warns the children not to assume that difficult tasks are impossible, noting, "One way to achieve the impossible is to change the climate." Are you dealing with a problem that seems unsolvable? Might changing the climate affect the outcome? Consider the possibilities. What can you do to get things started?
9. Why do you think the authorities dealt so severely with Tuptim's crime of passion? Contrast Mongkut's unbending desire to enforce the law and "save face" with how God demonstrated mercy and grace in redeeming us (John 3:16-18, Romans 5:15-20).

10. The grown prince recalls, “Anna had shined such a light on Siam.” Read Matthew 5:14-16. Ask, “Is your lamp under a bowl or on a stand?” If you’ve seen your teen’s light shining brightly, take this opportunity to describe what you’ve witnessed and how proud you are.



### Follow-Up Activity

Teens unfamiliar with Buddhism might benefit from comparing its esoteric beliefs with core Christian truths. An outstanding way to do this is with the help of *The Spirit of Truth and the Spirit of Error 2: World Religions*, Steven Cory’s foldout pamphlet from Moody Publishers that provides a side-by-side analysis of Christianity and other world religions, including Buddhism. Another brilliant resource (available in adult and teen versions) is the book *Jesus Among Other Gods* by renowned Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias.

If you enjoyed the epic story of Anna Leonowens and King Mongkut, consider renting the Oscar-winning 1956 musical *The King and I*, starring Yul Brynner and Deborah Kerr.



### Just for Fun

Young Tom Felton is likable here as Anna’s son, Louis. However, millions of moviegoers love to hate him in the recurring role he has become most famous for—Harry Potter’s malicious rival, Draco Malfoy.

—Bob Smithouser



# Ben-Hur

**Rated:** G

**Themes:** Christ's sacrifice, friendship, betrayal, perseverance, vengeance, forgiveness, pride, mercy, peace, God's grace and healing

**Running Time:** 3 hours, 32 minutes

**Starring:** Charlton Heston as Judah Ben-Hur; Stephen Boyd as Messala; Hugh Griffith as Sheik Ilderim; Jack Hawkins as Quintus Arrius; Haya Harareet as Esther

**Directed by:** William Wyler



## Cautions

Some intense action and violence will seem harsh for a G movie, but should pose no problem for teens. There are whippings, beatings, and other cruel acts (including Christ's crucifixion) by Roman soldiers. A battle at sea features sword fighting and bloodied slaves struggling to escape a sinking galleon. Men get trampled when chariots wreck during a big race.



## Story Summary

This winner of 11 Academy Awards (including 1959's Best Picture) is subtitled *A Tale of the Christ* because the title character periodically encounters an enigmatic Nazarene carpenter whose face we never see. It is a reverent tribute to Jesus, though the story focuses primarily on the trials, travels, and triumphs of Judah Ben-Hur, a Judean nobleman convicted of a crime he didn't commit by Messala, a boyhood companion who has become an ambitious, malicious Roman tribune.

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The time is A.D. 26. Judah, his mother, and sister welcome Messala after years apart, but pleasantries turn to hostility when Judah refuses to sell out countrymen who oppose Rome's intrusive rule. A freak accident involving a parading governor and loose roof tiles gives Messala an excuse to make an example of Judah ("By condemning without hesitation an old friend I shall be feared"). The women are imprisoned. Judah's strong back makes him a valuable galley slave.

After three years of rowing Roman warships and tasting the cruel sting of a whip, Judah finds himself aboard the galleon of military consul Quintus Arrius. Their ship falls under attack. Judah saves Arrius' life, earning him the emperor's thanks and the freedom to serve as Arrius' slave. But Arrius respects him too much for that. In Rome, Judah becomes a respected member of the consul's household—not to mention an excellent charioteer—before being legally adopted as his heir. Judah accepts Arrius' signet ring, yet feels called to leave these comforts and return home.

On his way back to Jerusalem, Judah encounters a wealthy sheik with splendid Arabian horses who asks him to drive his team to victory over the undefeated champion, Messala. Although tempted by the offer, Judah's quest to free his mother and sister takes priority. So does his yearning for a less sporting form of vengeance.

Judah arrives home to find his household dark and neglected. His servant Esther is there to embrace him, and they soon express a long-unspoken love for one another. She warns him to let go of his hatred, quoting the teacher who draws crowds on the hillside. Reluctantly, Judah decides he will forgive Messala if the tribune restores his mother and sister to him. Messala, somewhat intimidated by Judah's new status, agrees to find and release them if they are still alive.

Sadly, the women have developed leprosy in prison. They appear briefly to Esther, but demand that she tell Judah they are dead, which she does. Overcome by grief and rage, Judah decides to reconsider the



sheik's challenge to work with his horses and humble Messala in the arena. Judah wins, and in the process Messala's dirty play leads to his own fatal injuries. With Messala's body broken and bleeding, the proud, cold-hearted Roman takes a final stab at his old friend by telling Judah that his family can be found in the Valley of the Lepers.

What changed Messala? What destroyed Judah's family? What scourge threatens freedom? *Rome*. At least that's Judah's opinion. The bitter, tormented Judean prince respectfully returns Arrius' ring and embraces his former identity, though Esther claims she hardly recognizes the venomous man he has become. She speaks hopefully about the ideals of Jesus. Forgiveness. Love. Faith. Heaven. Then she and Judah prepare to take his mother and sister to the young rabbi, only to learn that the authorities have arrested him. A throng watches Jesus march toward Calvary. Then Judah has an encounter with Christ that changes him. And everyone learns that there is healing in the cross.



### Before You Watch

Remind your teen that, unlike today's computer-enhanced blockbusters, *Ben-Hur* is an old-fashioned epic made decades before the advent of the technical wizardry we now take for granted. The extras are actors. And the stunts are real.



### Bible Bookmarks

Gen. 37-45; Lk. 5:12-16, 17:11-19; Jer. 29:11-12; Jn. 4:13-14, 15:19, 17:14-19; 1 Pet. 3:15, 5:7; Rom. 8:28, 12:17-21; Matt. 6:26, 26:6; 1 Jn. 2:15-17



### Talking Points

1. Much of *Ben-Hur* is its own spiritual reward—a straightforward presentation of Christian themes just asking to be explored further. Ask, "What moment was most meaningful to you?" and "How did you feel about the way Jesus came across?" Talk about the filmmakers' overall attitude toward Christianity and how that differs from most Hollywood portrayals today.

2. What does Messala mean when he tells Judah, "It's a Roman

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world. If you want to live in it you must become part of it”? Can you think of a modern parallel? What do John 15:19, 17:14-19, and 1 John 2:15-17 warn Christians about becoming enmeshed in a worldly culture?

3. Sometimes childhood friends are tight because they live nearby, end up in the same class at school, or their parents are close. As they mature, however, different goals and values can drive a wedge between them. That seemed to be the case with Judah and Messala. Have you experienced this personally? With whom? What came between you?

4. Quintus Arrius is a faithless man who tells Judah, “Whoever the gods are, they take small interest in an old man’s hopes.” How do we know that God loves us? Do you feel that God takes an interest in the smaller aspects of your life? What evidence do you have (in addition to Jeremiah 29:11-12, 1 Peter 5:7, Matthew 6:26)?

5. Upon meeting Judah, Arrius belittles him for trusting in God and clinging to hope (“It’s a strange stubborn faith you keep to believe that existence has a purpose”). What would you say if someone told you that believing in God is vain superstition and that life is pointless? Remember, silence is not an option (1 Peter 3:15).

6. Which characters show loyalty, mercy, or compassion? How? How are they rewarded?

7. Judah’s thirst for vengeance meets with cooler heads in Balthazar and Esther. Read Romans 12:17-21. Have you been tempted to strike back at someone who has hurt you? Talk through that and choose to leave it in God’s hands.

8. How did you feel when Jesus offered the shackled Judah a drink? What about when Judah returned the favor on the road to Calvary?

9. Put yourself in Esther’s position. What would you have done when asked to lie to Judah about his mother and sister’s fate? Why?

10. Judah complained to Balthazar that, in spite of having received water from Jesus, he remained thirsty. What was he *really* thirsty for? Examine Judah’s similarities to the woman at the well introduced in John 4:7.

11. Before the chariot race, Judah essentially prays, “Forgive me for the sin I’m about to commit, but I’m going to do it anyway.” Have you ever found yourself praying like that? About what? How do you think God feels when we know what’s right but ignore it? Why do you think we’re so stubborn?

12. Does seeing leprosy portrayed this way provide a deeper appreciation of Jesus' interactions with lepers? How? Revisit some of those events in Matthew 26:6, Luke 5:12-16, and 17:11-19.

13. Balthazar says of the Messiah, "He lives and all our lives from now on will carry his mark." Do you carry the mark of Jesus? If so, how has that changed you? What sort of mark do you hope to leave on others?



### Follow-Up Activity

During your family devotions, read about the life of Joseph in Genesis 37-45. Note how his journey is similar to Judah Ben-Hur's: He was betrayed by a "brother." He spent years in slavery for a crime he didn't commit. He never lost faith. He did a heroic deed for an important leader. He was appointed to a position of power and authority. Discuss how this illustrates Romans 8:28, which reminds us that God will use setbacks and disappointments for our ultimate benefit if we keep our eyes on Him.



### Just for Fun

When he started writing the novel in the late 1800s, General Lew Wallace was spiritually ambivalent. But a chance encounter with the vehemently agnostic Robert Ingersoll changed that . . . and ultimately changed *Ben-Hur*. Ingersoll's anti-God diatribe led Wallace to rethink his story and set out to make the case for Christ's divinity. Soon Wallace experienced a conversion much like that of his main character.

—Brandy Bruce



## Appendix I: Life Lessons from Middle-earth

Following the release of the *Lord of the Rings* movies, I asked members of the cast this question: “While working on these films, did you learn a life lesson that would be valuable for teenagers today?” Consider using each response as a spark plug for family dialogue.



**Viggo Mortensen (Aragorn):** “The lesson, I guess, is that the union with others is more significant than your individual existence. It doesn’t deny the importance of your individuality. It just means you’re a better person the more you connect with others. You’re going to know more. You’re going to be stronger and you’re going to have a better life if you get over yourself. That’s part of growing up. . . . There’s the one side that is ‘get over yourself, listen to others, and don’t be selfish,’ but you have to balance that with ‘think for yourself and don’t believe everything you hear.’ We all have to do that.”



**Sean Astin (Sam):** “Contentment. That you can’t do everything all at once, right away. Be patient and take things as they come. Learn to live each moment. It’s the age-old thing that any 25- to 35-year-old person tries to tell a 15- to 20-year-old, but that they’re destined not to learn until they’re 25. As a 31-year-old man, I’ve finally gotten to that place.”



**Miranda Otto (Eowyn):** “*Lord of the Rings* reveres and talks about things I think society is aching to go back to. A lot of films these days concentrate on so many negative aspects of society. In the ’40s, [onscreen] ideals were about honor, loyalty, and dignity—qualities that we tend to forego so quickly for money. If someone says, ‘I’ll give you two hundred dollars if you take your clothes off and run around the block,’ a lot of people will do it.”

## Appendix II: Why We Love Superheroes

Have you ever wondered why we find certain superheroes so appealing? Take Spider-Man for instance. You start with Peter Parker, a normal guy who snaps pictures for the school paper. He sees the world much like we do, albeit through a camera lens. Suddenly the mother of all spider bites sends him climbing the walls battling evil. Oh, he's still Peter Parker. He eats, sleeps, and puts on his red-and-blue jumpsuit one leg at a time just like the rest of us. But he's *special*.

Or how about Superman? While not a native of earth (he was sent here as a baby from another galaxy), he's mortal, speaks perfect English, and looks like a *GQ* cover boy. Yet mild-mannered Clark Kent also possesses amazing strength, plus the ability to fly and see through things. Like Spidey, Mr. Incredible, Hulk, Flash, the X-Men, and countless other beloved characters, he is simultaneously human and superhuman—a person who can intimately relate to mankind, yet is uniquely empowered to save humanity from its current malaise.

Sound like anyone you know?

I believe we are wired by our Creator to resonate with that kind of hero. Jesus Christ arrived on this cosmic dirt clod as a baby, fully divine, yet fully man (Philippians 2:5-11). He got hungry, thirsty, and tired just as we do. He was a blue-collar laborer. He laughed, loved, and cried. He knew betrayal and pain. Hebrews 5:15 says, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet without sin.”

At the appointed time, Jesus shed his secret identity—a carpenter whose time had “not yet come” (John 2:4)—and began working miracles, displaying amazing spiritual strength and yes, even seeing through things (including a Samaritan woman in John 4:16-19). He came to rescue us. Not by soaring through town in a flashy red cape, but by humbly enlisting us into His own heavenly Justice League before heroically laying down His life. He is the one uniquely empowered to save humanity from its *eternal* malaise.

Throughout history, cultures have concocted second-rate saviors that tap into people's inherent need for a man-god. The most popular

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hero in Greek mythology was Hercules, sired by Zeus and born of a mortal woman. Destined to be the lord of his people, Hercules looked, walked, and talked like your rank-and-file Athenian, yet he exhibited extraordinary strength and went on to rule as an immortal god on Mount Olympus. Or so the story goes.

The parallels between fact and fiction don't stop with the good guys. Nearly every superhero must contend with a supervillain, usually a disgruntled megalomaniac bent on ruling or destroying mankind. Just as Spider-Man battles the Green Goblin high above the city streets, the Lord and his angels war against forces of darkness on our behalf in heavenly realms. There has never been a more ambitious, frustrated, or vengeful supervillain than Satan, the scheming, lying adversary of Jesus who himself wears disguises to conceal his true identity (2 Corinthians 11:13-15). Just as we shouldn't lose sight of Christ's ultimate heroism, it would be equally unwise to underestimate the real supervillain currently at large.

I'm not suggesting that Spider-Man and his comic book peers are dangerous counterfeits out to distract us from the One who truly deserves our affection. We simply need to connect the dots back to Jesus. After all, He's the genuine article! Hollywood has handed us a golden opportunity. Let's capitalize on it by helping others see how modern heroes can unintentionally point to mankind's inner longing for the real Savior.

—*Bob Smithouser*

## Appendix III: A Biblical Case for Discernment

Does God care which movies we watch? Absolutely! While the Bible may not mention Hollywood by name, it gives us plenty of principles that apply to entertainment. How are we wired? What type of content is healthy? What should we avoid? And how can we build a defense that lets us work through the “gray areas” armed with biblical truth? The following mini-concordance will help you guide your teen through verses critical to a deeper understanding of media discernment:

### *The War Within Us*

- |                   |                                      |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------|
| John 3:1-21       | • Jesus talks about flesh and spirit |
| Ephesians 2:1-5   | • The sinful nature brings death     |
| Ephesians 4:17-24 | • Out with the old, in with the new  |
| Romans 7:14-25    | • Paul admits his own struggles      |
| Romans 8:1-17     | • Jesus: Cure for the sinful nature  |
| Galatians 5:16-25 | • Keys to living by the Spirit       |

### *Avoiding Indecent Exposure*

- |                         |                                  |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Psalms 11:4-7           | • The dangers of loving violence |
| Psalms 101              | • David's pledge of purity       |
| Philippians 4:4-8       | • Your heart's best defense      |
| 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22 | • Test everything                |
| Colossians 2:8          | • Watch out for deceivers!       |
| Colossians 3:1-10       | • Trading junk for jewels        |
| 1 Timothy 4:7-16        | • A call to young Christians     |
| 2 Timothy 4:3-4         | • Don't waffle on the truth      |
| Exodus 20:1-21          | • God's original Top-10 list     |

### *Preparing a Defense*

- |                   |                               |
|-------------------|-------------------------------|
| Ephesians 6:10-18 | • The full armor of God       |
| Matthew 6:19-24   | • Protecting the eyes         |
| Proverbs 4:23-27  | • Guard your heart            |
| 1 Peter 1:13-16   | • Follow the Commander        |
| 2 Peter 1:3-11    | • Weapons of spiritual battle |

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Psalms 119:9-16

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

2 Corinthians 10:3-5

Romans 12:1-2

1 Thessalonians 4:3-8

- Armed with God's resources
- Training to win
- Taking thoughts prisoner
- Don't be *conformed*; be *transformed*
- Control your passions

### *The Value of Wisdom*

1 Kings 3:7-12

Proverbs 3:21-26

Genesis 41:15-40

Ecclesiastes 9:13-18

Matthew 5:10-16

John 10:1-18

Philippians 1:9-11

- Solomon asks for discernment
- Benefits of discernment
- Joseph interprets dreams
- A tale of wisdom as strength
- Salt and light to the world
- Knowing the Shepherd's voice
- The apostles' prayer for you

# Notes

## Introduction

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## About the Author

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