



BEN-HUR

Rated: G • **Running Time:** 3 hours, 32 minutes

Starring: Charlton Heston as Judah; Stephen Boyd as Messala; Haya Harareet as Esther; Jack Hawkins as Arrius

Director: William Wyler

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

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

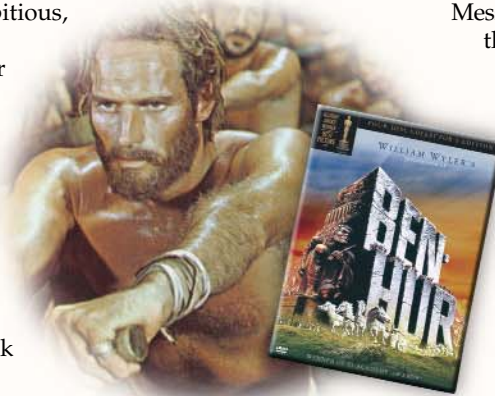
This winner of 11 Academy Awards (including 1959's Best Picture) is subtitled *A Tale of the Christ* because the title character periodically encounters an enigmatic Nazarene carpenter whose face we never see. It is a reverent tribute to Jesus, though the story focuses primarily on the trials, travels and triumphs of Judah Ben-Hur, a Judean nobleman falsely convicted of a crime by Messala, a boyhood companion who has become an ambitious, malicious Roman tribune.

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 who asks him to drive his team of splendid Arabian horses 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 at 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; Jer. 29:11-12; Matt. 6:26, 26:6; Luke 5:12-16, 17:11-19; John 4:13-14, 15:19, 17:14-19; Rom. 8:28, 12:17-21; 1 Pet. 3:15, 5:7; 1 John 2:15-17

Talking Points

1 Much of *Ben-Hur* is its own spiritual reward—a straightforward presentation of Christian themes just begging 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 film-makers' overall attitude toward Christianity, and how that differs from many Hollywood portrayals today.

2 What does Messala mean when he tells Judah, "It's a Roman world. If you want to live in it you must become part of it"? Can you think of a modern parallel? In what ways 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 on the same block, end up in the same class at school, or because 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? 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? (Read Jer. 29:11-12, 1 Pet. 5:7 and Matt. 6:26.) Do you feel that God takes an interest in the smaller aspects of your life? What evidence have you seen personally?

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? Why is silence not an option? (1 Pet. 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, despite having received water from Jesus, he remained thirsty. What was he really thirsty for? Examine Judah's similarities



Clockwise from above: Judah (left), his mother, sister and Messala; a moment with Esther; a toast to friendship; Judah's unjust arrest



to the woman at the well introduced in John 4:13-14.

11 Before the chariot race Judah essentially prayed, "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 as it is in the film give you 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

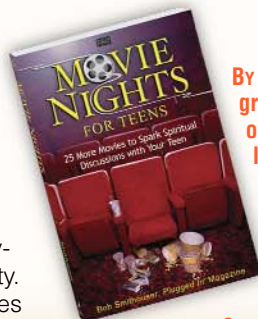
During your family devotions, read about the life of Joseph in Genesis 37-45. Note how his journey is similar to Judah Ben-Hur's: Betrayed by a "brother." Years of slavery for a crime he didn't commit. Never losing faith. A heroic deed for an important leader. Appointed to a position of power and authority. 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. —by Brandy Bruce



A **pluggedⁿ** Resource



BY THE BOOK: "The same teenagers 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."

—*Movie Nights for Teens*

You can request this resource by contacting Focus on the Family at 800-232-6459 (in Canada, 800-661-9800).