



THE
EXORCISM
OF EMILY ROSE

LEADER'S GUIDE
Discussion Guide & Bible Study

By Guy Higashi & Matt Webb

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Leader's Guide developed by:

Reel Spirituality

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Dear Friends of Reel Spirituality:

Film has become our culture's primary storytelling medium. Ask a group of people how many have seen *Schindler's List* or *Beauty and the Beast* and almost everyone will raise their hands. Such movies not only entertain, they educate, helping us see what we might otherwise miss. Of course, there are movies that are poorly done and others that survive on adrenalin alone. But many more help us explore life and its meaning through their honest portrayals and engaging narratives. Movies invite conversation and even communion. After watching a movie together with others, many find the film serving as one more "person" in the group, a guest who has sought truth and shared vulnerably. Having sought life at some more central region, movies encourage a similar searching, openness and vulnerability from their viewers.

To help you in this movie conversation, we at Fuller Seminary's Reel Spirituality Institute are publishing online study guides of selected, soon-to-be-released films. We trust you will find these guides helpful in your personal reflections, informal conversations, and ministry settings. Why not take a group of neighbors or friends to the cineplex and then discuss the film over coffee? You not only will get to know each other better, you might be surprised to find yourself in God's presence.

Happy viewing,

Rob Johnston and Barry Taylor
Codirectors, Reel Spirituality: An Institute for Moving Images



INTRODUCTION

The Exorcism of Emily Rose is an epic Hollywood horror film that chronicles the courtroom drama of “an exorcism gone bad.” The film is based on a true story in which the Catholic church, in an extremely rare decision, officially recognized the demonic possession of a 19 year-old college freshmen. Told in terrifying flashbacks, the story unfolds in a haunting trial as Father Moore, a Roman Catholic priest, is accused of negligence resulting in the death of Emily Rose, believed to be possessed. The film stars Laura Linney as the lawyer who takes on the task of defending the priest and Tom Wilkinson as the priest who performs the controversial exorcism.

The opening scene establishes the ethos of the film; the county coroner wades through the freshly blanketed snow in the front yard of the Rose family’s home. He knocks on the front door of the farmhouse as the camera moves to the second floor, revealing the covered window of Emily’s bedroom. Eerie sounds begin to unlock hidden secrets: groaning, the ominous inhaling and exhaling of a presence, gothic and ghostly combinations of piano and organ music. The camera frames the farm weather vane as its arrow blows in the winter wind. It spins and seeks direction, first pointing north, then erratically swinging east and west, hinting that Emily’s story will move into new possibilities.

The Exorcism of Emily Rose combines a courtroom battle over faith and science with a spine-chilling, mysterious battle between good and evil. The film also raises provocative questions: Does the spiritual world exist? If God exists, why would He allow evil, death, and demonic possession? What’s the relationship between facts and faith? What determines truth?

The strength of the film is its ability to address spiritual themes without presuming to have all the answers. It leaves viewers open to possibilities, open to spiritual conversation, and open to critically consider the questions the film boldly asks. The climax of the film is the surprise verdict that holds poignant spiritual weight for all Christians who hope to understand their faith and the gospel.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This leader’s guide, like the film, is designed to ask a number of thought-provoking questions. As you lead your group through discussion, do not feel obligated to address all of the issues or answer all of the questions contained here. The guide is ordered chronologically (opening arguments, the case, closing arguments, the verdict) but your conversation need not be. Let the interest of the participants and the flow of the conversation steer your time together.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Here are some additional resources that can help you prepare for your time together.

www.imdb.com

www.sonypictures.com/movies/exorcismofemilyrose/site

www.rottentomatoes.com/m/exorcism_of_emily_rose

www.aetv.com

“SPOILER” DISCLAIMER

If you, the leader, or members of your group will be using this guide prior to watching the film, know that certain sections may spoil the film for you. These “spoiler” sections are marked with a double asterisk (**). If you do not wish to know critical information about the film prior to watching it, please skip these sections until after your first viewing.

OPENING ARGUMENTS

The Prosecution

Ethan Thomas, a Christian and prosecuting attorney, opens his argument by showing Emily’s gruesome, post-mortem photo, arguing that physical evidence points to negligence on the part of Father Moore, who was entrusted to care for her. Under the direction of Father Moore, Emily rejected medical treatment, opting instead for Moore’s “religious treatment.” The priest and the church are not above the law, Ethan Thomas argues, claiming that Emily’s death was due to her medical and psychological condition, not possession.



1. How might have the prosecutor’s scientific argument contradicted his personal religious beliefs?
2. In a court of law, is it reasonable to put aside personal convictions in order to fulfill one’s vocation?
3. Did Ethan Thomas’ Christian faith inform his position as prosecutor? If so, how?
4. In your vocation, do you ever suspend personal beliefs in order to get the job done? How does your faith inform your work?

The Defense

Erin Bruner, an agnostic, takes the case of Father Moore’s defense in order to advance her career. In her initial interview with Father Moore she agrees to let Moore tell Emily’s story on one condition—he will have to let her do whatever it will take to set him free. However, when she is faced with Ethan Thomas’ opening argument, she opts to save hers until later in the trial.

1. Why do you think Erin chose to save her opening argument?
2. How do you think her silence affected the outcome—positively or negatively?
3. When she finally presented her opening argument, what was her appeal to the jury?
4. How might have Erin’s argument contradicted her personal religious beliefs?
5. How did the juxtaposition of the two arguments set the stage for the rest of the trial?



THE CASE

The Physical World:

The areas of medicine, language, physical behavior, and spiritual “phenomena” are addressed by both the prosecution and the defense—with dramatic differences of perspective. The trial is a repeated battle between medical treatment and religious treatment.

1. What were some of the specific physical issues used to “prove” both sides of the case?
2. Which arguments seemed to be won by the prosecution? What was convincing about these arguments?
3. Which arguments seemed to be won by the defense? What was convincing about these arguments?
4. Which arguments appeared to be inconclusive? Why was this so?
5. Could some arguments have legitimately gone both ways?
6. Do faith and science always have to disagree?

In the film, the physical world both affects and is affected by the spiritual world. The coroner cannot definitively confirm that Emily’s death is by natural causes. He infers that there seems to be supernatural intervention. Erin and Father Moore believe that they experienced physical interaction with spiritual forces.

1. How did these experiences color Erin’s perception of the case?
2. How did they affect her decisions in the courtroom?
3. What experiences have you had that seemed more than coincidental? How have these experiences colored your perceptions and decisions?
4. Where in the Bible does God use the physical world to interact with people?
5. Do you think that God still interacts in these ways today?

The Spiritual World:

Throughout the case the overarching theme of faith versus science is repeated. Some real questions are asked as a result: Does the spiritual world really exist? Are God and the devil real? Is demonic possession even a possibility?

1. How did the film represent faith versus science on a cinematic level? What sorts of sights, sounds, symbols, people, places, and things seemed to represent the side of faith? What about the side of science?
2. How did the prosecution and the defense use both faith and science in their favor?
3. Are these big questions possible to answer? How would you respond if asked to prove them one way or the other?

It is often said that Christians may be “oppressed” but not “possessed.” Yet, Father Moore and the Catholic Church feel that Emily’s condition was “demonic possession”. Ephesians 6:12 states, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realm.” 2 Thessalonians 3:3 says, “...but the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one.” There is a similar prayer of protection in the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6:9-14).

1. What signs of “possession” did Emily manifest?
2. This raises another question; can Christians be possessed?
3. What do the above scriptures say about possession and evil forces? Are there other scriptures that address these issues?
4. Why would God allow Emily or anyone else to be possessed?
5. Why does Emily say that God has allowed her to be possessed? Do you agree with her rationale?



Erin Bruner then uses science to validate the possession and issues of faith. The testimony of Dr. Aghdashloo and the experiences of Dr. Cartwright suggest the connection between faith and science.

1. What elements of the film bridged the gap between faith and science?
2. How do faith and science coexist in your religious perspective?
3. At what point does science end and faith begin? Does such a point exist?

Truth

**Erin states that “the system worked” when her former client was set free. The facts of her case “proved” that he was innocent, yet the truth is discovered later when he murders again.

1. How might the truth be hiding behind the facts presented in Emily’s case?
2. How do you think Erin’s realization that her former client was guilty affected her opinion of Father Moore’s guilt or innocence?

The scientific facts of Emily’s case point to the guilt of Father Moore.

1. What about his case points to his possible innocence?
2. Was there more than faith that might have made Father Moore innocent?

There are some things that occur in life that cannot be explained. “Demons exist whether you believe it or not” is a phrase used in the film to present the possible co-existence of God and the devil.

1. Is this a reasonable argument?
2. Can you believe in the spiritual world without ascribing to a specific religion?



CLOSING ARGUMENTS

The Prosecution

Ethan Thomas states that the family trusted Father Moore, but he abused and misused his authority. Thomas “proves” through science and facts that Moore was guilty of criminal negligence.

1. How did this argument relate to his overall argument over faith and science?
2. Did Thomas’ understanding of the spiritual world contradict his profession of faith as a Christian? Explain.
3. Like Thomas, do you sometimes separate faith and facts?
4. How did Thomas’ name reflect his understanding and argument in this matter?

The Defense

Erin Bruner challenges the jury to choose to believe in the facts or faith. She acknowledges that facts matter in court. “Either demons exist or they don’t. Either we’re alone or we’re not.” She begs the jury to choose to see that there is a possibility that the spiritual world is as real as the physical.

1. How did her argument relate to the criminal understanding of reasonable doubt?
2. Why would she appeal to the possibilities?
3. How did her argument treat facts and faith?
4. What did she mean when she asked the jury not to believe in Father Moore’s beliefs, but to believe in Father Moore?
5. How does this understanding of belief fit into your understanding of belief in God/faith in Christ?
6. Have you or has anyone you know gone through a similar change of perspective on belief and proof as Erin experienced?

**THE VERDICT

The jury returns with the surprise verdict of “guilty”. However, they suggest to the judge that Father Moore be set “free” based on the time Father Moore has already served while incarcerated during the court proceedings. In other words, the jury finds Father Moore “guilty as charged, and free to go”. Father Moore is guilty by the facts, yet set free by the truth presented.

1. Why do you think the jury found Father Moore guilty?
2. If Father Moore was guilty according to the facts, why did the jury set him free?
3. In light of the Christian faith, is there a parallel between the “guilty but free to go” judgment for Father Moore and us today?





Emily Rose' tombstone quotes Phil 2:12, "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling..." This passage provokes a number of questions about its meaning for the film and for our lives.

1. Why do people love to go to horror movies?
2. How does fear affect your relationship with God?
3. Are there different kinds of fears?
4. What are fears of each of the characters? Erin? Moore? Thomas?
5. With this in mind, how does Emily's epitaph relate to her understanding of fear?
6. What did Emily have to endure to solidify her understanding of this passage?
7. When you've read this passage before, what words were most important to you?
8. How has your reading of Phil 2:12 changed in light of this film?