

KINGDOM OF HEAVEN



LEADER'S GUIDE

Discussion Guide and Bible Study

By Sarah E. Oesch and Kara Stewart

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Reel Spirituality

An Institute of the Brehm Center for Worship, Theology, and the Arts at

Fuller Theological Seminary

135 N. Oakland Ave.

Pasadena, CA 91182 USA

www.reelspirituality.org

Text: Sarah E. Oesch and Kara Stewart

Editor: Lauralee Farrer

Layout: Erin Dunkerly

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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



OPENING REFLECTIONS

As you launch into this study guide, look at and think about the following questions for a few moments. Write down some of your thoughts to refer to later.

1. What do you think of the director's depiction of Christianity? How many versions were depicted and what were they?
2. How does the world view Christianity? How is it similar to or different from the movie's portrayal?
3. What religious symbols are prominent throughout the film, and what was their purpose and place?
4. What message does it convey when a "religious" army will convert with the cross or kill with the sword—all to proclaim the good news of Jesus?

***"Be without fear in the face of your enemies.
Speak the truth, always, even if it leads to your death.
Safeguard the helpless and do no wrong.
That is your oath."***



The young French blacksmith, Balian (Orlando Bloom), is lost. Upon the death of his wife and child, followed by rejection from his church and community, he feels abandoned by God. His father Godfrey (Liam Neeson), who had abandoned his wife before his son's birth, walks into his life at this pivotal moment to offer him adventure and an opportunity to find meaning and purpose. He reluctantly agrees to accompany his father to Jerusalem to seek forgiveness. What he finds is a more authentic understanding of God and what God wants from him. Before reaching Jerusalem, Godfrey dies of a battle wound, commissioning his son to fight the good fight, honor the knights' code, and protect King Baldwin of Jerusalem and the innocent people who live under the King's care.

Ridley Scott sets his drama against a backdrop of historical events. Muslims conquered Jerusalem in the 7th century AD. In 1095, Pope Urban II instigated a 200-year-long quest (eight crusades in all) to regain the Holy Land from Muslim control. His battle cry was, "God wills it!" Scott's story takes place in the year 1186, between the second and third crusades. King Baldwin IV was a good-hearted king who died young of leprosy, and Saladin was a revered and wise leader of the Saracens. The rest is a beautiful interpretation of what might have taken place had we been there to witness the events of the crusades ourselves.

“GOD WILLS IT!”

This is a phrase used throughout the film by Christian and Muslim alike. The words stir their respective armies into battle-hungry frenzies. They are the *de facto* end to all dialogue, aiming only to stir the warrior’s appetite and his hunger for victory against the faceless “enemy of God.”

1. Have you ever been in a conversation with a fellow believer who cut you short with that phrase or one like it? Have you ever found yourself using it to justify a wrong action or attitude?

Anything can be moralized in our hearts and minds when we attach the phrase, “God wills it!” Crusaders believed they were following “God’s will,” when in reality much of their motivation was greed and power. When faith is used in the business of earthly kingdoms, we can bargain with each other using God’s name until morality is removed from the equation altogether. As Balian embarks on his journey to the Holy Land, or the “kingdom of heaven,” a man standing on the shore calls out to the eager Crusaders, “To kill an infidel is not murder, it is the path to heaven!”

2. What are some examples of this attitude manifesting itself today?
3. Can you think of other historical events and atrocities committed in the name of God by people of faith (e.g. U.S. slavery, oppression of women, witch hunts, etc.)?

In the midst of so many characters using these words to advance human agendas, one character actually dares to ask for God’s opinion. When Balian first arrives in Jerusalem, the first place he wants to see is Golgotha—the hill where Jesus was crucified. When he arrives at the summit, he asks God, “What is it you want?” The beautiful silence that follows is a reminder that God’s voice is missing from the dialogue so far; however, feeling he was not answered, Balian descends the hill discouraged. He later remarks to the Hospitaler—one of the surviving friends of Balian’s father whose spiritual calling it was to follow the crusading soldiers and tend to their physical well-being—that he is “outside God’s grace,” and that he can’t discern the will of God. The Hospitaler reminds him, “Fanatics of every denomination claim to know the will of God. It’s what you do every day that will determine whether you are a good man or not.”

4. How do you discern God’s will?
5. Does God answer Balian?
6. If so, what do you believe that answer is, and why didn’t Balian hear it? Do you believe he eventually heard God at all?

FAITH AND WORKS

Screenwriter William Monahan describes what he sees as the heart of his script, “You’re defined by your actions—not what you say, not what you claim to be, but what you do.”* *Kingdom of Heaven* is a film about right action, not great religious creeds or the protection of kingdoms and icons. In the world of this film, God’s will is done when good men and women choose to act in a

* *Kingdom of Heaven* Press Kit, 2005 Twentieth Century Fox

way that will advance the kingdom of heaven on earth through bravery in the face of danger, speaking the truth always, and safeguarding the helpless.

Read James 2:14–26

1. Reflect on 2:22–23. What does it mean that “as a result of the works, faith was perfected”?
2. Balian doesn’t profess to have faith, yet he feels he is out of God’s grace. What are we to conclude from his actions?
3. The Crusaders profess faith in Christ—what do we conclude from their actions?

THE KNIGHTS CODE: “THIS IS YOUR OATH...”

Monahan’s “Kingdom of Conscience” is “built from the Knight’s code.” Right action in the kingdom of heaven is adherence to this code. For today’s Christians, the code might be “What would Jesus do?” Is it cavalier to compare a medieval Knight’s code to our admonition to live as Christ did, or are there legitimate similarities?

“Be without fear in the face of your enemies.”

Balian had every reason to fear as he stood with his small band of soldiers in the face of Saladin’s army. Instead of running for safety, he stood firm in his convictions to prevent another massacre.

1. Why did Balian face his enemy without fear?
2. How did Jesus face those who would have him killed?
3. What other biblical characters showed true bravery in the face of great odds? Do you think this could be considered a pervasive biblical theme? (e.g. Gideon, Deborah, Rahab, Paul, Judith—from the apocryphal book, etc.)

“Speak the truth, always, even if it leads to your death.”

Though he knew his life would be at risk, Balian confessed himself a murderer to the officers who came to arrest him at the beginning of their journey.

Jesus spoke the truth and it led to his death. Joseph told King Potiphar the true meaning of his dream even though Joseph could have been killed for his candor. Esther took a great risk by asking her husband, the king, to spare the Jews, even when it required her to reveal her own Jewish heritage.

4. What is the purpose behind speaking the truth?
5. Is it a legalistic command or a practice that should inform our interactions with others?
6. The people who hid Jews in their homes during Nazi occupations didn’t follow this command. Why is this considered acceptable?

“Protect the helpless.”

Balian’s mission in Jerusalem became protecting those with no political power or means to protect themselves. He is told that his father was important, but his people are not. Upon learning that he had inherited a great deal of land, one thing distresses him greatly: there is no source of water. Balian leads his new community in a search for water, not to make his land more profitable, but for his people, who needed water to survive.

By declining to marry Sibylla, Balian protects Guy and his followers even though he knows Guy wants him dead. In this case, he protected the “undeserving.”

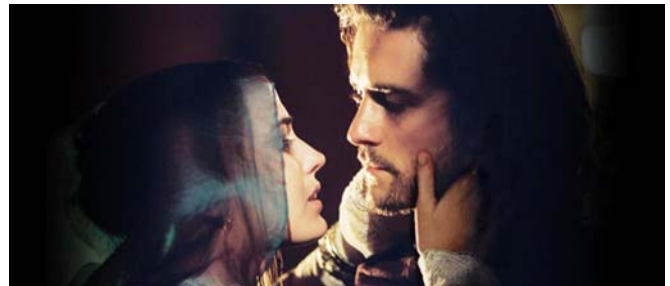
When the final battle for Jerusalem looms, Balian and the other leaders are presented with the option to abandon the city and its people in order to save their own lives. Balian stays and helps to fortify the city for the sake of the people. As he walks down a hall of huddling children, women, and elderly, he sees a beautiful picture of those valuable enough to battle for.

Read James 2:14–17 again and reflect.

7. Did Jesus have favorites? Is there anyone unworthy of being covered by Jesus’ blood? Consider the story of the Good Samaritan.
8. Does the law of the Old Testament reflect this theme? How did the purity laws protect the people? Were they legalistic codes or did they have a larger purpose? (e.g. protection from diseases) What about the Year of Jubilee—which requires the forgiveness of debts?
9. Did Old Testament prophets have anything to say about the plight of the helpless?

“Do no wrong.”

King Baldwin shares some wisdom with Balian during their first meeting. He says all of us are accountable for our own actions regardless of the promptings of kings, commanders, bosses, spouses, peers, etc. Balian reminds Baldwin of this admonition when he is asked to take Sibylla as his wife and send Guy to his death. A king may manipulate a pawn but each person is responsible for his own soul.



10. How would the outcome have changed had Balian agreed to be used as a pawn in this way? In the grand scheme, would Jerusalem have been better off?
11. Is it permissible to compromise your morals and your faith when it leads to a greater good?
12. Could Balian have been happy as King of Jerusalem, and husband of Sibylla, in the years to come had he decided to go along with the advice of King Baldwin and Tiberias?



Refer to your responses to opening reflections.

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Have any of your thoughts on these questions changed? How do you think the world will perceive us in the light of this film's portrayal? How can our actions reflect our faith better? Can this film help to open up dialogue with people who don't believe as you do?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Kingdom of Heaven the film

Official movie website: www.kingdomofheavenmovie.com

View the trailer: www.kingdomofheavenmovie.com/trailer.html

Reel Spirituality, a creative encounter between the Church and Hollywood, is part of The Brehm Center for Worship, Theology and the Arts at Fuller Theological Seminary. For additional study guides, film resources, and updates on Reel Spirituality, please visit our website at www.reelspirituality.org.



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