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WE BOUGHT A ZOO



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**THE FOLLOWING COMPANION EXPLORES SOME OF THE MOST
IMPORTANT THEMES RAISED BY *WE BOUGHT A ZOO*.**

It can be used for personal study, post-movie family conversations or larger discussion groups.

INTRODUCTION

Based on a true story, the delightful and inspiring new film, *We Bought a Zoo*, takes audiences along for the ride as it chronicles the story of Benjamin Mee, a Los Angeles newspaper columnist and adventure writer who, as a widowed father, faces the challenges of raising his two young kids. Hoping that a fresh start and a new life will restore their family spirit, Mee quits his job and buys an old rural house on 18 acres outside the city that comes with a unique bonus feature: a zoo named the Rosemoor Wildlife Park, where dozens of animals reside under the care of head zookeeper Kelly Foster and her dedicated team.

With no experience, limited time and a shoestring budget, Benjamin sets out with the support of his family and the local community to reopen a zoo. As he does so, he and his family find fulfillment and hope by turning to life and joy in the love and service of others.

About the Companion Guide

The following companion explores some of the most important themes raised by *We Bought a Zoo*. It can be used for personal study, post-movie family conversations or larger discussion groups. Its aim is to help relate the moving story of the Mee family to our own personal stories as we endeavor to live more authentic Christian lives.

ROSEMOOR
WILDLIFE PARK



THE STORY AT THE HEART OF ALL STORIES



A Christian audience, while delighting in the hopeful story of *We Bought a Zoo*, may well ask, “But what does this have to do with the gospel or Jesus?” The filmmakers have not included moments of prayer, decisions for Christ, nor mentions of the Christian faith in the film. So what’s the connection?

The connection is what the Christian tradition calls “the Easter mystery”: a story that, however dark it may get at some points, begins and ends in joy. This is the story of Christ, whose birth begins a life in joy, but who faces the forces of sin, death and evil, and overcomes them by surrendering his life in love, going down into death, and then rising again in hope and triumph. This is the pattern of all our truest and best stories. It is the pattern Benjamin Mee and his family live out as they too face death and the sad effects of sin in the world; and overcome them through

sacrifice, hope and love. While belief in Christ is necessary to see this basic story pattern clearly, one need not be a Christian to experience it, because the God who made the world has imprinted it on the whole of reality. That is why Ecclesiastes 3:11 says “He has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man’s mind.” All of human existence bears the mark of the One who made it, so that all truly human stories, including *We Bought a Zoo*, contain echoes of the Great Story of Jesus. With that in mind, let’s take a look at some questions about the film and see the pattern of Christ’s life emerging from it.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

A constant theme of *We Bought a Zoo* is the power of life and love to overcome grief and loss. The zoo and the friendships Benjamin forms with Kelly and the other staff become a source of life for him as he invests himself in sacrificial giving for the good of the zoo and his family. In this, his life reflects that of Jesus, who likewise lays down his life in sacrifice and passes through death to resurrection and new life. Have you ever had an experience where what seemed to be a dying for you actually ushered in life? Have you ever taken a chance on doing the right and loving thing in faith and found that God blessed it and brought joy out of it?

Benjamin and his family begin their story like Christ begins his, with joy. Benjamin’s joy was in his wife, Katherine, and in their children. After summoning his “20 seconds of courage,” Benjamin

draws on the memory of that joy as he chooses to look through the photographs on his computer, and finds healing from the pain of her loss. Scripture says that “the joy of the Lord is my strength” (Nehemiah 8:10). Have you ever had a moment in your life when you needed to rely on the memory of some past joy to see you through a trial in the present? What was that like? Have you ever, like Jesus, endured a cross for the sake of the joy that is before you, in the confident hope that God would see you through it to the happiness of the resurrection (cf. Hebrew 12:1 – 2)? What was the joy you received in fulfillment of your hope? What joys do you still hope for?

One major theme of *We Bought a Zoo* is the transformative power of love. How many different ways is love expressed between the characters in this film? This includes not just romantic love, but love between parent and child, love for animals, and love between friends, as well as other sorts of love (for work, home, etc.). How many

different streams of love flow into and out of your life every day? How is God (who is love – 1 John 4:7 – 8) hidden in these loves and how do these streams carry you back to the ocean of love who is God?

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES TO PONDER:

Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. (1 John 4:7 – 12)

See also: Colossians 1:24 – 27; Matthew 10:39



HOPE AND GRACE

We Bought a Zoo opens on a family that is experiencing a difficult loss: that of Katherine Mee, Benjamin's late wife. Each character is reacting to that loss at the beginning of the story. However, the story is not a sad one but ultimately a joyful one!

Redemption begins with Benjamin recognizing the need for a change. He decides to move and discovers a property which not only has a charming old house on it, but a broken-down zoo with 200 animals and a volunteer staff who care for them. When his little girl Rosie reacts with joy to the place, Benjamin, struck by a kind of inspiration that feels like destiny, decides to buy it, quit his job as an adventure writer, and make this his adventure instead.

Benjamin knows nothing about running a zoo, and his staff, led by Kelly Foster, is initially skeptical about him. The skepticism only becomes deeper when he is confronted with the challenges of making ends meet and bringing the zoo up to inspection code by opening day. In addition, the growing estrangement from his son makes the struggle even more challenging. And Benjamin's "sensible" brother keeps offering amusing but pessimistic counsels that threaten to undermine all his efforts. But one by one, obstacles are overcome by a combination of perseverance, hard work, and a little grace at the right time in the form of an unexpected financial windfall from Katherine.

Dylan too receives grace, not only in the form of "tough love" from his father, but in the form of Lily Miska, a sweet

young girl who develops a crush on him and whose persistence and innocence ultimately break through the defenses he has erected to remain strong. Benjamin too provides the hard grace Dylan needs to break out of his prison of self-pity and embrace the "20 seconds of courage" it takes to choose life again after passing through darkness.

Unlike many Hollywood stories, this tale allows its hero to find fulfillment and hope, not with the standard conclusion of "getting the girl" but by embracing his cross and turning it to life and joy in the love and service of others. By the film's end, Benjamin makes it clear to Kelly that he will not be able to reciprocate her feelings for him because his love for his wife was too deep. Instead, the film ends with the triumphant establishment of the zoo as a thriving work that continues to this day, and with Benjamin coming to terms with the loss of his wife and finding the courage to return to the café where they met and tell his children the story of their love with pure, life-affirming joy.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

In scripture, God calls Noah, like a sort of ancient Benjamin Mee, to save the animals and his family from the approaching flood by building an Ark (Genesis 6 – 9). St. Peter says of the flood and Ark that "Baptism ... corresponds to this" and that it "now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him" (1 Peter 3:21 – 22). Scripture likewise tells us that Baptism is a sign of and participation in Jesus' death and resurrection (cf. Luke 12:50; Romans 6:1 – 12). How does the zoo become a sort of Ark by which he finds salvation from his "flood" of troubles? Have you ever found yourself in a flood of trouble? What sort of Ark did you use to ride out the storm? How does your flood and Ark point to the hope of Christ?

Paul tells the Christians in Rome, "[W]e rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us (Romans 5:3 – 5) Benjamin's well-meaning brother continually offers counsels of doubt and tells him to give up. Have you ever had to rely on hope in defiance of all the "sensible" advice to give up and stop trying? Did you pursue a "20 seconds of courage" technique to arrive at that hope? What or who were you hoping in? What was the result? How is hope in Christ different from



mere hope that the weather will be nice, or you will get a better job?

The first four virtues are called "cardinal" or "natural" virtues. They are Prudence, Justice, Temperance and Fortitude. They are "natural" in the sense that, unlike the "theological" virtues of faith, hope and love (which are gifts given by God so that we may believe in, hope in and love Jesus Christ), the natural virtues can be practiced by anybody. Prudence is the sense to see what is so and to respond accordingly. Justice is to give what is rightly due a person. Temperance is the right use of the world's goods. And Fortitude is the guts and perseverance to see things through. How are these virtues lived out by various characters in *We Bought a Zoo*? How are these virtues not lived out? Can you think of people in your life who embody these virtues?

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES TO PONDER:

"Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you."
(Deuteronomy 31:6)

See also: Romans 8:18 – 25;
Romans 15:13

COURAGE



The word “courage” comes from the French word “cœur” which means “heart”. To “encourage” someone is to “put heart” into them. *We Bought a Zoo* is a story, in many ways, of courage. Again and again, Benjamin makes acts of courage. He thinks, not merely with his head, but with his heart as well. Jesus, likewise, tells us to love the Lord our God, not merely with our mind, but “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30). Love, in other words, requires a total commitment of the whole person.

Benjamin is a man of total commitment. His commitment to his wife was total, and in this he reflects the image of Jesus, whose commitment to his Bride, the Church, and to God his Father is absolute. When he loves, he loves with all of himself and calls us to love with all of ourselves. However, Benjamin also understands that his loves must be prioritized. So he loves his children more than his fellow workers and his fellow workers more than the animals. In the same way, Jesus calls us to love completely, but in right order, loving God first and then our neighbor as ourselves (cf. Mark 12:28 – 31).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

The Mee family, like many people, finds that loving commitment to the zoo animals and the people who take care of them is a healing experience for them. Have you ever taken a vacation or found some place (a beach, a wood) or some creature (a dog, cat, horse, etc.) that helped to “bring you back down to earth” when you felt lonely or out of control? Did it restore you? Have you ever encountered the power of the Holy Spirit speaking to you through Creation?

Ancient Jews used the same language to describe the work of Adam in the garden and the work of the priests in the Temple. Have you ever used work as an experience of prayer in which you lovingly offer what you are doing to God? How might you go about transforming the work you do, whatever it is, into an offering to God?

What are some of the ways in which Benjamin’s total commitment to his family and the zoo are reflected in acts of courage? What are some of the ways in which you have either seen or yourself performed acts of commitment that sprang from the heart? How is Jesus the model for perfect acts of love and courage?

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES TO PONDER:

“I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living! Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; yea, wait for the LORD!” (Psalm 27:13 – 14)

See also: Joshua 1:5 – 9;
1 Corinthians 5:6 – 7



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WITH NO EXPERIENCE, LIMITED TIME AND A SHOESTRING BUDGET, BENJAMIN SETS OUT WITH THE SUPPORT OF HIS FAMILY AND THE LOCAL COMMUNITY TO REOPEN A ZOO.

As he does so, he and his family find fulfillment and hope by turning to life and joy in the love and service of others.



THIS GUIDE WAS CREATED BY ALLIED FAITH & FAMILY.