

The most popular American novel of the 19th century was completed just three hundred miles away from Lubbock. Former Civil War general Lew Wallace was serving as the Territorial Governor of New Mexico. And in the Palace of the Governors on the Plaza in Santa Fe, he completed his most famous novel in 1880. *Ben-Hur* was an enormous success, eventually surpassing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to be the best-selling novel of the 19th century. And it would remain atop the list of all-time best-selling American novels for more than half a century, until it was surpassed by *Gone With the Wind*.

In 1899 *Ben-Hur* also became a hugely successful play that would run for 21 years and push the boundaries of what could be staged in a theater. It even recreated the famous chariot race scene with horses galloping on giant treadmills which in turn drove a rotating backdrop that sped by. It was supposedly quite the spectacle.

In 1925 MGM released a silent movie of *Ben-Hur* that would be that studio's biggest grossing movie for 25 years.

And in 1959, MGM decided to remake the film. That version starring Charlton Heston was extremely successful. It is still in a three-way tie for most Academy Awards wins of all time. And since this is a sermon series dealing with great Hollywood films, I'll focus on the way the 1959 movie presents story of the hero, Judah Ben-Hur, though the movie does differ significantly at times from the plotline of the novel.

So why is *Ben-Hur* so enduring and so popular? At one level it has many elements that check the boxes for popular entertainment: action, adventure, romance, exotic settings. Plus there's that perennial favorite—rooting for the underdog—cheering on someone battling back and seeking revenge for being falsely accused and imprisoned. And if you can add to it pageantry and spectacle—a huge naval battle, and later a world-famous chariot race—you've got a winning combination.

But there's another aspect to *Ben-Hur's* popularity. And that comes from its real title. Its full title is not *Ben-Hur*. Rather it is, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*.

Judah Ben-Hur is the protagonist. But at crucial times his life intersects with that of his contemporary, one Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Christ. And these encounters are crucial in Judah's life. And they help Judah Ben-Hur transcend and escape the destructive cycles he is in.

And if we're in any doubt about the importance of Jesus in this film, the very opening scenes depict his birth and the visit of the Wisemen, one of whom will be a recurring character later in the movie.

And Jesus keeps reappearing in *Ben-Hur*. But the filmmakers treat him in a rather special way. We never see Jesus' face. Instead, we see people's reactions to him. And most important are the interactions between Jesus and Judah Ben-Hur.

In our first lesson today from the book of Acts, Peter has been arrested and is put on trial before the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. They ask Peter why he won't be compliant and stop talking about Jesus.

Peter replies,

"We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins."¹

These words of Peter's could almost be a summary of the themes of *Ben-Hur*.

First is the question of obeying God rather than human authority. Again and again Judah Ben-Hur wants to be compliant to the authority of Rome but will only go so far. He hits various points where choosing to follow God is more important than following civil authority.

The second theme is Jesus' identity, in Peter's words, as "Leader and Savior." It could be translated as "Prince and Savior." Judah Ben-Hur is himself a Jewish prince. But he eventually comes to follow Jesus as his true leader.

The third theme is the centrality of the cross. For Peter, it is Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection that are central components of the Good News. And for Judah Ben-Hur, the crucifixion of Jesus will prove to be the source of new life for him and for his family.

Without Jesus in the movie, *Ben-Hur* would devolve into just another Hollywood melodrama, albeit one with high production values and incredibly filmed spectacle. But with Jesus' presence, not only is the overall movie elevated, but Judah Ben-Hur himself finds his own life elevated and changed in profound ways.

Even though the movie clocks in at more than 3 ½ hours in length, its basic trajectory can be boiled down to two struggles that Judah Ben-Hur has.

The first struggle is to win vengeance against his former friend Messala.

The second struggle is to deal with despair. I want to spend a few moments dealing with both of these struggles.

Vengeance. That is the driving force behind much of the plot.

Early on in the movie, Judah the Jewish prince reunites with his best childhood friend, Messala, who has returned to Jerusalem to serve as a Tribune to command the Roman garrison there. Their joyful reunion quickly turns sour when Messala asks his friend Judah to betray his fellow Jews who speak out against Roman occupation. Judah refuses, and that drives a wedge through their friendship.

¹ Acts 5:29-31

A few days later, Messala falsely imprisons Judah's sister and mother, and condemns Judah to serving as a Roman galley slave. As Judah is being dragged away, he tells Messala, "May God grant me vengeance! I will pray that you live until I return!"

That desire for vengeance keeps Judah alive for three years, far longer than life expectancy of the average galley slave. And during an epic battle Judah saves the life of the Roman Counsel, who eventually has him freed and adopts him as a son. The former Jewish prince turned galley slave is now a part of the Roman nobility. And as such he returns with his new status to confront Messala.

Judah demands that Messala release his mother and sister. He says, "Find them, Messala. Restore them to me and I'll forget what I vowed with every stroke of that oar you chained me to."

Judah is told his mother and sister are dead. But in truth they had contracted leprosy in prison and are in the leper colony outside the city. Judah decides to seek revenge against Messala in the middle of a great chariot race, one of the greatest action scenes ever put on film. And it's all filmed with real horses and real human beings—there's no CGI or special effects.

In the end, Judah wins. Messala has been thrown out of his chariot and trampled, and he is hauled off, bloody and dying. But with his dying breath, Messala reveals that Judah's mother and sister are still alive. He says,

"Look... look for them... in the Valley... of the Lepers! If you can recognize them!"

At that point Charlton Heston doubles over in this paroxysm of extreme grief, which is probably what got him the best actor Oscar. And Messala tells him with his dying breath, "It goes on. It goes on, Judah. The race... the race... is not... over!"

So Judah Ben-Hur wins the race. He gets vengeance on his enemy. Messala is dead. Judah goes out to receive the crown and the cheers for the victor. And it turns out to be a hollow, pyrrhic victory. More than 2 solid hours of the cinematic revenge trajectory ends for Judah, and he is not satisfied. He's gotten everything he's wanted and dreamt of and worked for for years, and found that it's really nothing.

And that begins the second great theme of this movie—despair. And that causes Judah to reflect on an earlier occurrence—his first encounter with Jesus of Nazareth.

As Judah is being force-marched to slavery in the galleys, the column stops in Nazareth for a water break. The centurion says that Judah is to receive no water. Judah cries out,

"God help me."

And at that moment, an unknown stranger, who turns out to be Jesus, gives him water anyway. And Jesus basically stares down the centurion so that he'll allow it. We don't see Jesus' face—but we see the centurion's reaction—and it's clear that there's something powerful about this man who faces him down.

At the time, Judah saw this stranger's intervention as being life-saving and giving him the strength to go on.

But now, in the despair portion of the movie, Judah reflects on this experience very negatively. He says,

"When the Romans were marching me to the galleys, thirst had almost killed me. A man gave me water to drink, and I went on living. I should have done better if I'd poured it into the sand!"

And then he adds, "I'm thirsty still."

But during this despair portion, Judah is also told several times by multiple people about a new teacher preaching forgiveness and love. He won't know it's Jesus, the guy who gave him water, until much later.

Judah is eventually reunited with his mother and sister, but his sister is dying. Judah takes her to see Jesus to ask him to heal her. But it's seemingly too late—Jesus is on trial and on the way to the cross.

It is only then that Judah recognizes Jesus as the one who gave him water years before. And Judah follows him to the cross, and Judah a witness to Jesus' death.

Unbeknownst to him, at that same moment Judah's mother and sister are healed of their leprosy. And a bit later when they're together again, Judah tells them of Jesus' death. He says,

"Almost at the moment He died, I heard Him say, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do... And I felt His voice take the sword out of my hand."

The death of Jesus rescues Judah Ben-Hur from the futility of vengeance and despair. Instead, Jesus' death brings Judah hope, and healing, and a new life.

When General Lew Wallace started writing *Ben-Hur*, he had no strong religious convictions. In fact, after an accidental conversation with the era's most famous agnostic, Wallace was embarrassed about how little he knew about Christianity. And so he started researching the Bible and everything he could find about the Holy Land. And as he continued his research and as he continued writing his novel, Lew Wallace became a firm believer in Jesus. Like his fictional protagonist, Lew Wallace also found hope, healing, and new life in Jesus Christ.

This is the Second Sunday of Easter. For 50 days every year we celebrate the joy of Jesus' resurrection.

In the face of vengeance, or despair, or grief, or sorrow, or any of the other negative forces that impact our life, we celebrate the empty cross and the empty tomb.

Christ is risen from the dead. And he offers hope, and healing, and new life to us all.