



SHERLOCK HOLMES (Cert 12A; DVD cert 12)

Directed by: Guy Ritchie

Running time: 123 minutes

Caution: Sequences of violence and action, some startling images and a scene of suggestive material.

SUMMARY

In director Guy Ritchie's reinvention of two of the most popular literary figures of all time, Holmes and Watson find themselves drawn into the extraordinary case of Lord Blackwood. Caught by Holmes, executed by hanging and pronounced dead by Watson, Blackwood is seen walking away from his own tomb. A practitioner of the dark arts, all of the signs seem to point to a miraculous resurrection. What's more, Blackwood's prophecies of the deaths of others seem to be coming true. Convinced by the overwhelming evidence of his powers, a secret circle of influential people swear their allegiance to Blackwood as he plans to take over the English parliament. Does Blackwood have the powers he seems to have, or is he the mastermind behind an elaborate sequence of deceptions?

Holmes and Watson find themselves in a race against time to avert a national disaster and to explain the seemingly inexplicable. They are joined by Irene Adler, crook and former lover of Holmes, who is, unknown to them, also carrying out her own plans under the watchful eye of the mysterious Professor Moriarty. Will they get there on time? Will their friendship, threatened by Watson's intended marriage to Mary, be strong enough to carry them to the end?

WHAT YOU FELT ABOUT THE FILM

Sometimes young people find it hard to contribute to a group discussion. They may feel shy or that their contribution might appear silly. The first part of the session is therefore a chance for young people to think about the film and begin to develop a reaction to what they have seen in a way that everyone will have something to contribute. This is a simple, quick exercise to get everyone thinking about their reaction to the film.

Have a toaster ready, with some slices of bread, a plate, some butter or margarine, and a choice of spreads.

Place a slice of bread in the toaster. Explain to the group that you are going to ask everyone to take turns in saying what they thought about the film until the toast pops out of the toaster, at which point the current speaker can butter and eat the toast with a spread of their choice. While that person is eating their toast, repeat the activity. If necessary, repeat again until everyone has said something.

KEY THEMES IN THE FILM

Guy Ritchie's Sherlock Holmes is the latest interpretation of the character from the short stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Holmes is brought right up to date through the acting of Robert Downey Jr (well known as Tony Stark in the *Iron Man* movies) and Jude Law brings a refreshing new interpretation to Holmes' assistant Watson. Instead of the stereotypes we might have expected from these characters, they are stylish, vibrant and very likeable, with a real strength of appeal to the modern viewer. In this fast-paced action movie a number of themes are explored that are relevant to Christians today. We will consider four of these themes in the sections that follow.

1. Fear and superstition

The clip runs from 22.35 to 25.37

The prison cells in Blackwood's block have been cleared out because Blackwood is 'getting inside the heads' of the inmates. When Holmes visits him, Blackwood tries to sow seeds of fear into Holmes' mind in a number of different ways:

- He reads out verses from Revelation 13 referring to 'the beast', and
- hints at dark supernatural forces ('Your mistake is to imagine that anything earthly has led to this moment. Your error of judgment is to assume that I am holding the brush at all. I am merely the channel'), then
- alludes to inescapable fate ('Those lives were a necessity ... called to serve a greater purpose');
- he also speaks prophetically of the future ('I will rise again ... three more will die'), and
- sows doubt in Holmes' mind by questioning Holmes logic-based approach to life ('Beneath your mask of logic ...').

Exercise

Give out a piece of paper and pen to each person. Ask them to write a fear or worry that they have. Tell them to be as specific and as honest as possible, but not in such a way that they could be easily identified. Collect all of the sheets and place them in a suitable container.

Mix up the pieces of paper and give one to each person. Each person should then read one fear aloud and attempt to explain the nature of the fear. Do not allow any sort of comments on what the reader says. Simply listen and go on to the next reader.

After all fears have been read and commented on, as a whole group discuss some of the common fears.

Explore the basis for the fears. For example, is 'fear of the dark' really 'fear of being hurt'?

Key question: Why do you think people become afraid of things?

Relevant Bible verses:

- Nehemiah 6.1–14
- 1 Kings 22.1–28
- Psalm 23.1–6
- Matthew 10.28–31
- Philippians 4.4–9
- 1 John 4.4

2. Deception

The clip runs from 36.09 to 37.59

Lord Blackwood is a master of deception and his plans for power are built on an intricate series of lies and illusions that convince others that he has supernatural powers. In this scene, we see the grave from which Blackwood has arisen (slabs of stone smashed from the inside), a scared witness who saw Blackwood rise from the grave, and the confirmation from Watson that Blackwood had no pulse after his execution. It all seems to point to a supernatural resurrection, although Holmes' sniffing of the rocks hints at an alternative explanation.

Exercise

Ask the group members to prepare to share three facts about themselves. Two should be true, and one false. Give them five minutes to think about what facts they will share.

Then ask each person to share their facts and ask the others to guess which fact was false.

When everyone has had their turn, explore with the group what is was that made some of the falsehoods convincing.

Key question: How do you distinguish truth from lies?

Relevant Bible verses:

- Genesis 3.1–5
- John 8.44
- 1 Corinthians 12.10
- Colossians 2.2–4
- Hebrews 5.11–14
- Revelation 13.11–14

3. Friendship

The clip runs from 39.14 to 42.08

This scene begins with Holmes and Watson having one of their more friendly conversations while Holmes leads them to a location where a clue can be pursued. Holmes has set up a gypsy woman to put Watson off marrying Mary as he is jealous for Watson's friendship. She starts enigmatically enough ('Brothers, not in blood, but in bond') but it soon becomes a farcical prophecy about the dull and dreary life Watson will lead if he gets married. Holmes suggests to Watson, 'You are terrified of life without the thrill of the macabre.'

It is just one scene of many in the film that demonstrate the two men's obvious friendship for one another and some of the self-centred attempts to preserve it in its current form.

Exercise

Read 1 Corinthians 13.4–7 together. Go through the statements about love one by one, asking one person to score statement 1, the next person to score statement 2, etc. The person scoring should give three

scores out of 10 for their statement based on the following questions:

- What score would you give Holmes on that statement?
- What score would you give Watson?
- Think about your best friend. You don't have to name them! What score would you give them?

For example, 'love is patient':

- Holmes: 6/10
- Watson: 8/10
- My friend: 9/10

Key question: If 1 Corinthians 13.4–7 was the benchmark for friendship, what score out of 10 would your best friend give you and why?

Relevant Bible verses:

- 1 Samuel 20.24–42
- Proverbs 12.26
- Proverbs 17.17
- Proverbs 18.24
- Proverbs 27.6
- Philippians 2.3–4

4. Power

The clip runs from 1.08.23 to 1.11.40

Blackwood's aim is to obtain power and he uses the illusion of dark magic to convince others to side with him. His aspirations are very high: 'My powers and my assets were given to me for one purpose ... to create a new future. A future ruled by us ... We will remake the world.'

Blackwood has to deal with one more contender for the throne of the secret order – Standish, the

American ambassador. Blackwood forces a showdown with him and ensures both the downfall of his opponent and the close allegiance of the other members of the order in the process.

Exercise

You need a die. Ask the group members to get into a circle. Each person rolls the die. If they roll a six then they become king (or queen) until the next person to role a six. The king can choose a slave, who must do whatever the king commands (within reason!). The slave might be asked to fetch a cushion, massage the king's shoulders, say nice things about the king, and so on. Both king and slave sit out of the activity until someone else rolls a six, when a new king emerges and the old slave is released. A person may not be nominated a slave three times without having also been a king at least once.

At the end of the exercise, explore what it was like being the king and the slave.

Key question: Why is power so dangerous?

Relevant Bible verses:

- Esther 5.9–14
- Proverbs 28.28
- Mark 10.42–45
- Acts 12.22–23
- Jude 25
- Revelation 19.1

TAKING IT BACK TO FAITH

The third part of the session is a chance to compare the story of the film with a story in the Bible. What are the similarities and differences, and what does this tell us about God's Kingdom?

Young people may not grasp all the theological points that could be made, but it's important for them to begin to get used to the idea of critiquing what they see and holding it against the values and beliefs of the Christian faith.

Some of this reflection may come from an open discussion and as seen above, there are many themes and directions that this could take.

The passage from Revelation 13 that Blackwood is reading to himself in the cell provides a striking comparison with and, at times, contrast to, the story of Sherlock Holmes. It forms part of a vision that John (one of Jesus' disciples) was given during a time of exile (Revelation 1.19). Although the nature and interpretation of the book as a whole is a matter of lively debate amongst scholars, the overall meaning is clear enough.

Exercise

Read Revelation 13.1–17. The dragon is the devil. The identity of the two beasts is more controversial, but doesn't affect the questions below. Use these questions to explore some of the similarities and differences between this passage and the film.

- What appears to be the dragon's purpose in giving authority to the first beast?
- What do you think lies behind Blackwood's lust for power?
- The second beast 'performed great and miraculous signs ... he deceived the inhabitants of the earth' (13.13–14). In what way is the beast's deception similar to Blackwood's? In what way is it different?
- The second beast wants control over the affairs of men (13.16–17). What are the different techniques that Blackwood uses to secure power?

- Who is the primary object of the rage of the beasts?
- What is expected of believers (the saints)?
- Where else in the Bible might you turn to for help in the struggle against the devil and his followers?

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