

Roman J. Israel, Esq.

Faith Discussion Guide

Introduction

Roman J. Israel (Denzel Washington) is an idealistic defense attorney whose life gets upended when his mentor—civil rights icon William Henry Jackson—falls into a vegetative state and dies. He's then recruited to join a law firm led by George Pierce (Colin Farrell), an ambitious lawyer who was one of Jackson's former students. Israel's legacy of activism soon gets put to the test when he takes on the case of Langston Bailey, a young man accused of murder.

***Roman J. Israel, Esq.* perfectly captures the tension between idealism and pragmatism, the brokenness of our justice system, and the moral, ethical, and legal complexities of daily life. It is also a deeply spiritual film that brings to mind passages of scripture and teachings of the Christian tradition. Below are a series of conversation starters to spark discussion around this provocative film.**



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A Wilderness Experience

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

~Matthew 4:1

***Roman J. Israel, Esq.* is a wilderness movie because it recalls what is known in Christian traditions as the temptation narrative. Jesus, shortly after his baptism, goes into the wilderness to pray. While there, he is tempted three times, all of which are, essentially, attempts to lure him away from his ministry with the promises of personal security or wealth. Jesus resisted all three offers, relying on spiritual strength rather than physical comfort.**

Roman repeatedly faces similar experiences throughout his life, most of which he has resisted. These temptations have also been for a life of more creature comforts and personal security. He has resisted these to serve the less fortunate and those in trouble. The crisis in the film comes when Roman gives into temptation, choosing personal security over the difficult life to which he had been called—and gifted—to lead. By placing his trust in the comforts of this world, he placed himself in greater danger than he had ever experienced before.

Questions for Consideration

- 1. Think about moments of temptation in your life. What were they? How did you resist? Or why did you give in?**
- 2. Who are the people and what are the resources that help you resist the temptations that would draw you away from the life you feel called to lead?**



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Hope Don't Get the Job Done

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

~James 2:14-17

With his law partner lying in a coma, Roman's professional life begins to collapse around him. Without his steady income—meager though it may be—his situation becomes perilous. His partner's wife and niece tell him that they *hope* they can provide temporary relief for him, perhaps in the form of a severance package. When he hears this, Roman responds, "Hope don't get the job done."

In the face of tragedy, we are quick to offer hopes and prayers, either in person or, more frequently, through social media channels. There is nothing inherently wrong with hoping and praying for positive outcomes or for a bad situation to turn good. However, if we stop there, we don't get the job done. Put another way, according to scripture, faith without works is dead. As our hearts and minds are moved, we must move our hands and feet to put those feelings, hopes, and prayers into concrete action to serve and care for those around us that are in need.

Questions for Consideration

- 1. Where do you see hope, but little action? Are there places around you full of action, but no hope?**
- 2. How do hope and action fuel your work for good in the world?**



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Put Yourself on Trial

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

~Romans 7:15-20

The framework of *Roman J. Israel, Esq.* is a trial, but it's no ordinary court case. Roman is putting himself on trial. He has accused and found himself guilty of hypocrisy and a litany of moral, ethical, and legal failures. He has betrayed his beliefs and lost sight of the higher calling to which he had devoted himself for decades. Not only does Roman try himself, he is prepared to see that justice is served as he marches to the police station to turn himself in.

In many ways, in his betrayal of his ideals, Roman is a lot like the Apostle Paul, who, while an early champion of the Church and responsible for much of its growth, was keenly aware of his tendency to do wrong. Consider the tension in the passage of scripture above. This is the essence of Roman's struggle. He knows the law inside and out, yet he breaks it anyway. He knows that humanity is deeply flawed, but fights for fairness anyway. While his lack of social graces is certainly part of his illness, he does know that he should treat people with more respect, but he doesn't. Like the Apostle Paul and Roman J. Israel, we know these frustrations, and this knowledge should be the first step to our intentional pursuit of a better life.

Questions for Consideration

- 1. What does the struggle between good and evil look like in your life?**
- 2. Have you ever put yourself on trial? If so, what was the result?**



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The First Law of Nature

[For] all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

~Romans 3:23

Roman may put himself on trial, and find himself guilty, but he is simultaneously aware of a deeper truth. As the film concludes, Roman says, “We are all born of frailty. Let us pardon each other’s folly. That is the first law of nature.” Of course, this doesn’t mean our actions don’t have consequences. After all, Roman is turning himself into the police when he is murdered. But, as we consider consequences, and how we treat each other when we feel wronged, it is important to remember that we are all born of frailty.

In scripture, we read something similar: “[For] all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Jesus knew this deeply, which is why he talked at length about extending mercy to one another: “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye” (Matthew 7:1-3). Unfortunately, we are so quick to forget this. We judge *everyone* constantly. We hold grudges. We live in a country that practices the death penalty, the *ultimate* act of judgment. We are members of faith communities that thrive on an “us vs. them” mentality. We simply forget that we are all different, but bound together by one similarity. We are all born of frailty and need the grace of pardon when we, intentionally or otherwise, live into that frailty. As Roman also reminds us, “Each of us is better than the worst thing we’ve done.”

Questions for Consideration

- 1. When have you felt actively judged by someone else? How did it make you feel? How did you respond?**
- 2. Are you able to find the good in even the “worst” person you know? If so, how does that help you interact with them?**



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The Brokenness of Our Justice System

Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

~John 18:36

Without being preachy or melodramatic, *Roman J. Israel, Esq.* does an effective job of conveying the brokenness of our justice system. With over-crowded prisons and courtrooms and prisons run by for-profit corporations, it should come as no surprise that "criminals" don't often receive the fair trials on which our society prides itself. The accused are often under- or inadequately represented and, as a result, unaware of the injustices perpetrated against them by this justice system. A central point of concern in the film is the plea-bargaining process in which "criminals" are threatened with egregious sentences so that they feel pressured to accept a deal for a reduced sentence.

This broken system is contrary to the world that Jesus sought to usher in through his ministry. While there are numerous interpretations of the above scripture, *Roman J. Israel, Esq.* reminds us that the world in which we live is a far cry from the world that Jesus would have us build. Jesus' words are an eternal indictment of the shortcomings and injustices in all human systems, which are on full display in the film. However, we can't let this stop us from working for a better world. Like Roman, we must keep walking.

Questions for Consideration

- 1. Where do you see broken systems in the communities of which you are a part? How can you and your faith community help heal those?**
- 2. Look at your local communities. Where do you see glimpses of the kingdom of God (examples of justice, forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace)?**



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These Three Things

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?

~Micah 6:8

Roman devotes his life to the law and to the service of others. He has done so at great cost to his comfort and appearance. He walks everywhere (no small feat in Los Angeles!). He has a meager diet (peanut butter sandwiches for dinner). He hasn't updated his clothes in years ("In lieu of a wardrobe, I chose activism," he tells Maya). He listens to music on an ancient iPod. The list could go on. By *rejecting* these things, he has *chosen* another path, a more prophetic way.

Faith-based social justice activists are fueled by theology and scripture, not the least of which is Micah's proclamation quoted above. Roman walks humbly. His humility extends to his work, where he spends most of the time "in the shadows" providing the arguments and information that his partner needs to successfully try a case. Love might be a strong word for Roman, but he works for mercy, fighting for more merciful sentences for his clients. In both his work and volunteering, he has a passion for and does justice. We don't have to possess a brilliant legal mind like Roman to follow in his footsteps. No matter where we live or work, we can embrace these three things, justice, mercy, and humility, in all that we do to serve and care for those around us.

Questions for Consideration

- 1. What are the sacrifices you make for the job you do? What are the sacrifices you make to love and serve others?**
- 2. Think about your job. In what ways can justice, mercy, and humility shape the work that you do?**

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Doing the Impossible for the Ungrateful

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

~Matthew 5:43-48

Roman is underpaid and overworked. He toils away at a thankless job, and when he transfers to a new firm, the managing partner initially wants to exploit him. But Roman seems content to live his simple life, and then he experiences a breakdown, of sorts, and uses his ill-gotten money to treat himself to the "finer things" of life.

While we all need the occasional break, we as Christians are called to live lives of thankless service. We are to do the impossible for the ungrateful. And if we take the teachings of Jesus to heart, we are called to do even more: "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:27-31). What can be more impossible than loving our enemies and being kind to those who harm us?

Questions for Consideration

- 1. Have you ever had a thankless job? If so, what was it and how did you persevere through it?**
- 2. Have you ever seen someone do the impossible for the ungrateful? If so, what did that look like?**

