

Companion Guide  
to

# The Bridge

## The Pump

## The Mouths of Babes

Based on guides previously published  
by Mass Media Ministries  
with major contributions by Edward McNulty

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# Companion Guide to The Bridge / The Pump / The Mouths of Babes

## THE BRIDGE

### **Important! Read before showing the program.**

Plan to preview *The Bridge* two or three times. Special care should be given to the preparation of your viewers. If they are not properly prepared for the tragic theme and intense emotion of the film, some individuals may become extremely upset. As facilitator you should be prepared to deal with a variety of viewer responses: grief, anger, despair, resignation, disbelief, cynicism, confusion, denial, bewilderment, etc. The program may be especially upsetting to anyone who has suffered the death a child.

### **Synopsis**

This film shares a tragic day in the life of a young child and his father. The father and child attend to the chores, plant seed in the garden, stroll and play together. Eventually the father sends the boy back to the house so he can go to the nearby swing bridge. It is his job to turn the railroad bridge so that an upcoming crowded passenger train can cross the river safely. A malfunction in the controls causes the man to have to hold the tracks together manually until the fast approaching train crosses the river. Meanwhile, the mother sends the child to get the father as it is time for her to go to the hospital to deliver her second child. As the father holds the tracks together with an iron rod, he looks ahead and sees the child coming across the tracks in search of him. Behind him the viewer sees the passenger train speeding into view. It is at this moment the father must decide whom to save — the train passengers or his little boy. In deep sorrow the father decides to save the passengers on the train even though the child will be killed.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Tragedy is a part of the human condition. Accidents do happen. Even so, do you believe the mother and father in the story could ever forgive themselves for the boy's death? How do you think they would feel about the new baby, whose birth initiated the tragic chain of events which led to the boy's death?
2. Do you feel that the mother should be held responsible for the accident (because she sent the young child into a dangerous situation)?
3. Do you think the father had any other alternatives? If so, what were they?
4. Could the father's decision be considered noble? What is the difference in sacrificing yourself and sacrificing someone else for a just cause?
5. Consider the decision you might have made in such a situation. Do you feel you know what course you would have taken?
6. For some the film is a parable of the atonement and crucifixion of Christ (John 3:16). Discuss the film from this viewpoint.

## THE PUMP

### A vivid parable for young and old

*If you trust too much, too easily, you will be deceived.  
But if you do not trust enough, you may not live at all.*

*Abraham trusted God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. - Romans 4:3*

The first of the above quotations prefaces *The Pump*. The second one is St. Paul's quotation of Genesis 15:6, which he uses a part of his argument about faith and works. The story of *The Pump*, like that of Genesis 15:6, is set in the desert. Both deal with the themes of trust and faith. In the ancient story, a man trusts and lives — indeed, passes on a great heritage to his posterity. In this modern story, a man fails to trust and dies — and leaves only the possibility of disappointment and death to those who come after him.

The program opens with the quotation, credits, and the notation that it takes place in August, 1947. A man who is traveling alone in his car in the California desert stops to look at his road map. We see on the map the warning that no one should turn off the main roads without inquiring locally.

The driver sees on the map an unimproved road that looks like a shortcut. He turns onto it. The camera shows us quick glimpses of the inhospitable desert — the sand, the cactus and sagebrush. Next we hear the grinding sound of the motor — car trouble, miles from any sign of help! The man keeps grinding away at the starter until the battery is worn down. He looks at the highway map. Again we see a close-up of the warning on the map.

The traveler walks away from the road, apparently hoping to find another shortcut cross-country. He brings no hat, no canteen, no provisions. After a long hike in the hot sun, he comes upon a ghost town. Only a lizard observes his passage through the empty street. The wind and the squeaking of a rusty gate hinge are the only sounds. And then the man sees the old water pump.

He rushes to it and begins pumping frantically. No water. He increases the fury of his pumping, causing the pump to shake violently. Still not a drop of water. Exhausted, the man sinks down on the ground. A creaking noise draws his attention to a tin can hanging from a nail on the pump. The man finds a note inside the can.

Apparently left long ago by an old prospector, the note assures the reader that there is plenty of water in the well, but the pump will work only if it is primed (filled first with liquid to expel air). There is just enough water for this in a bottle hidden close by. The reader is warned not to drink any of the water because there is only just enough to prime the pump.

The man hastily digs up the bottle. He pauses as he recalls the old prospector's warning, but he drinks the water anyway. A little later, he falls in the desert. Back at the pump, the camera shows a closeup of the spout — on which a drop of water has formed.

## Utilization

*The Pump* is an open-ended allegory that lends itself to a variety of uses in church school, library and community settings.

It can be used with youth groups to emphasize lessons on long-range planning, exercising judgment and trusting the wisdom of those who have gone before. In discussions of drug use, sexual activity and similar matters, *The Pump* vividly illustrates the importance of considering long-term consequences when faced with short-term temptations.

*The Pump* is an excellent resource for explorations of the practical insights of the Book of Proverbs. It can be used also to examine faith and lack of faith. A study of the patriarch Abraham could begin with this program, for example — or it could be shown later as a contrasting example of “nonfaith.”

Finally, *The Pump* provides important lessons about respecting the environment and preserving natural resources for those who follow.

## Discussion Questions

1. How did you feel watching the program? Did you want to say something to the man, perhaps to warn him not to do what he was about to do? What were your feelings at the end?
2. What was the man’s basic problem? Have you ever tried to take the short or easy way out of a difficult situation? What happened?
3. Describe and discuss some other situations in which people might be tempted to take shortcuts.
4. Look at some major stories in the newspaper. Were any of the disasters reported on caused by someone taking a “shortcut”?
5. All around us are signs warning us of hazards. List as many as you can think of (road and traffic signs, notices on high voltage equipment, the warning on a pack of cigarettes, rules posted at the beach, etc.). Do the warnings help? Why do people sometimes ignore them? For youth groups: What are some warning that parents and other adults have given to you? What do you think of them? Are they annoyances that keep you from having a good time?
6. What do you think of the character whom we never see but whose voice we hear through the note? What kind of person must he have been? Compare him to the traveler.
7. Tom Christensen, the filmmaker who made *The Pump*, says of the main character, “He has now ruined the same opportunity he had — ruined it for future generations. We do leave a legacy, a heritage, that follows us through our children and beyond. Our actions today will affect them tomorrow.” What has the traveler “ruined”? Make up an alternative story about what could happen at the pump in the future. What legacies are we as a society and we as individuals leaving to future generations?
8. How can *The Pump* be interpreted as a parable about faith — or about lack of faith? What does the quotation at the beginning have to do with the story? How can you trust “too much, too easily”? Can you think of some situations when this might occur? (Some examples: young children meeting strangers, buying a used car, accepting a friend’s invitation to share his cocaine or other drug.) In what way does the traveler not trust enough? What are the two instances when he failed to trust the warnings of someone else?

9. Look in a concordance for the words “trust,” “faith,” and “believe.” (You can point out to the group that in the New Testament the Greek word *pisteuo* can be translated by these three English words.) Select a few of the passages for the group to look up and discuss.

Suitable passages include

- Genesis 12-15 (especially 15:6)
- Isaiah 12:2
- Matthew 17:19-21; 21:21
- II Corinthians 5:6-7
- Psalms 37:3; 52:8
- Habakkuk 2:4
- Romans 4 & 5
- Hebrews 11:1-2

What does it mean to believe or to trust/have faith in? What is the object of trust in most of these passages? Why should we trust in the right person or thing?

10. Abraham is regarded by the Apostle Paul (and later by the writer of the Letter of James, though his argument is very different) as the great man of faith in both Romans and Galatians. How is the story of Abraham similar to that of the traveler in *The Pump*? What is the major difference between them? If the group is not familiar with the patriarch, have them read Genesis 12-15.
11. What was the promise made to Abraham? To the traveler? What would have happened if Abraham had not trusted God’s promise but instead had stayed home? (Or maybe it would be better to ask, what would not have happened?)

## THE MOUTHS OF BABES

*Let the children come to me, and forbid them not . . . - Matt. 19:14*

### Synopsis

This is very simple, consisting mainly of a series of questions to which various young children respond. As the film opens, we see and hear a group of Sunday school children singing, "A sunbeam, a sunbeam, Jesus wants me for a sunbeam. . . ." Then various children respond to a series of questions, ranging from the nature of God to values and ethics. Many of these questions are found in the discussion section of this guide. During a singing interlude, many of the children are more interested in each other than in the music. Some more questions follow, and at the end of the film, a boy and his parent, hand in hand, leave the church building.

### The Questions:

#### 1. About God:

- a. "How old do you think God is?" "97, 120, 4,000, six or four months." Do children have much of a concept of age? Is there a danger that adults, in asking children such questions, are baiting the children in the hope that they will come up with "cute" answers?
- b. "Where do you think he lives?" "In heaven." "Where's that?" "On a cloud or very high mountain . . . California." Do children think in abstract or concrete terms? Can you recall some example?
- c. "If he lives up in the sky, how can he hear you?" "He has big ears." Is there logic to the boy's answer?
- d. "Have you ever seen God? What does he look like?" "Like my Heavenly Father." Where has the child received this answer? What image does it convey? "How come nobody has ever seen Him?" "Nobody has to see Him . . . because I don't know where His store is. And my Mom and Dad don't know either. . . ." What does "store" suggest this girl's concept of God is like? Would she understand any of the credal definitions of God, such as in the Westminster Catechism?
- e. "What does God do every day?" "Reads the paper." "Then what?" "Brush his hair." "What's he getting ready to do?" "Go to church." Where do these concepts come from? What does this say to parents about influencing their child's faith concepts through their family life?

#### 2. Relating to God

- a. "Do you say your prayers?" "Yes." "Who are you praying to?" "Heavenly Father." When does your family (or class) pray? What prayers do you use? What do they teach a child about God? Are there words or concepts in them which a child might find difficult? Are there silences in your prayer time for listening? Are the prayers varied — thanksgiving, intercession, confession, etc. — or is prayer mainly a device to get something you want?
- b. A little boy responds to a series of questions "I don't know" and to "who taught you all this," "My Dad." Would the children in your life respond in a similar way, or has more transpired between you? How do you spend your time with children? Estimate the amount of time spent on each activity. How does the time spent in reading the Bible, praying and talking over your faith compare to other activities?

- c. "What happens to bad people?" "They get spanked." How can we teach a child discipline as a part of love?
- d. "Are you saved?" The boy answers with a story based on Star Wars. How has he mixed his fantasy world with reality? How could the question mislead him? How do films and TV influence a child's concepts? What can parents do about this?
- e. What do the children understand about the devil? Where do they get such ideas?

3. The Church and Sunday School:

- a. How do the children misconstrue fasting? Do they understand any of the principle underlying it?
- b. What do the sacraments mean to the children? How can we help them grasp their meaning? Is this best done by explanations or by allowing them to experience them?
- c. What view do these children seem to hold of the church and Sunday school? Is it positive? What about the children in your church? In *The Ministry of the Child* suggestions are offered to make children more a part of the church. What are some ways?

4. Ethics:

- a. What are some of the things Jesus told us to do? What not to do? "Don't talk with your mouth full." How do children mix up family mores and rules with the basic principles of God? Do adults do this at times? How?
- b. What do you think of children's response to the questions about teaching from the Sermon on the Mount? Where do children get their sense of social justice? How can we teach sharing? By sharing ourselves?
- c. What does the girl's answer about "don't take off the covers of thy neighbor's wife" reveal about a child's grasp of the Ten Commandments? Which of the Ten can such young children be taught?
- d. A little boy says, "I say my prayers every night so I can be a better boy." How can this make one a "better" person? Is such a utilitarian regard for prayer wise — or should prayer be taught differently?

5. Further Questions:

- a. Piaget and other educators teach that a child progresses through a series of stages. Thus many concepts are inappropriate for children at certain stages of their development. Which of the questions do you think are beyond children? How do their answers reveal this? Is this due to the language of the question or to the concept itself?
- b. What are the goals of your church school? Of your family? What ways can you measure progress in achieving these goals?