

# The Legend of Percival

## Study Guide

### Note to the Leader

*The Legend of Percival* can be a catalyst for you to open up discussion with your young people on basic questions we all must face on our pilgrimage through life.

The program can be used with children as young as eight years old up through mid-teens.

The key factor is the leader. For young people to get the most out of the program, it needs careful introduction. Point out some of the perennial themes and questions the story raises. Emphasize how the story is rooted in our cultural history. Stress how the problems we face today are not new. The basic questions and challenges have been faced by young people in every generation. Encourage the young people to enter Percival's world to see what he saw and feel what he felt.

In the following pages you will find background and introductory material as well as suggested activities and questions that we trust you will find helpful. Obviously you will want to select and tailor to the age and maturity level of your group.

Be sure to point out how the Grail story is one that keeps coming back and served as the source for such contemporary productions as *The Fisher King* and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.

### Introduction

The tale of Percival is wrapped in the legend of the Holy Grail. In medieval lore, this is the vessel used by Christ at the Last Supper (whether chalice or platter is unsure). The legend further has it that the Last Supper took place in an upper room owned by Joseph of Arimathea and that Joseph used this same vessel to catch the blood of Christ at the foot of the cross on Good Friday. This same tale-tradition continues by having Joseph carry this sacred piece to England where it was eventually lost. (The legend emerges in novel form in Thomas Costain's *Silver Chalice*.)

To find the Grail became the quest of all good Christians, but especially for the Knights of King Arthur's Round Table. The Grail adventures of these gallant men form a large part of the medieval romance tales. In them the Grail became a symbol for the reign of God when all the world would be restored to peace. In their various forms they tell the story of a civilization growing up. In personal terms, they speak of the struggle which all Christians have in their efforts to mature into responsible followers of Christ.

Percival and other medieval legends have had such a powerful impact upon all succeeding generations that scarcely none of them has missed an opportunity to retell them, giving their timeless truths new expression (in poetry, prose, painting, theater, opera, film, television). Psychology and analysis have also called upon these sources as symbols of human behavior.

But the best research seems to hold that, in their original forms, these legends—and especially that of Percival—are essentially religious tales. They are efforts to express what it means to struggle with the quest for becoming fully alive in Christ. The times which spawned this epic tale were saturated in Christian consciousness, so there was no need to be obvious about Christianity's role as the motivating force behind the story and its hero. But the reference to Christianity becomes quite clear in the closing moments of our retelling of Percival's adventures in this video.

The summary of Percival's story should equip the leader with a sufficient background to make him or her comfortable with using the legend as a teaching device for moral development with young people. In order to present as much of the legend as possible in a relatively short span, *The Legend of Percival* has been condensed appreciably. The primary sources relied upon, for the most part, are the twelfth-century lyric poet Chretien de Troyes and the thirteenth-century German writer Wolfram von Eschenbach. Scholars of this period in literature will find much that is missing and much that is blended. But this is to be expected in any retelling of such a monumental tale.

## **Historical Background**

by James Robertson

The Percival character was born specifically in Celtic myth, though the archetype—the simpleton who sees the world—exists universally in many primitive folklores.

The first significant literary treatment of the story came in the twelfth century (A.D.). French lyric poet Chretien de Troyes wrote five romances involving the court of King Arthur, the legendary sovereign who headed the Round Table. Percival's story is told in Chretien's last work, a long, unfinished poem entitled *Le Conte du Greal* (*The Story of*

*the Grail*). The plot of the poem is basically the same plot as presented in the video program.

When Chretien was writing his poetry, the major religious and social phenomenon of the time were the crusades. The First Crusade began in A.D. 1095 and lasted four years. It was the only one of the European expeditions into the Holy Land that achieved its stated aim—namely, capturing Jerusalem (site of the Holy Sepulchre) for Christendom from the ruling Seljuk Turks.

There followed, for about three hundred years thereafter, a series of crusades. For the most part, they were only expeditions to assist those who were already in the Holy Land. In military terms those crusades were all utter failures.

From the very beginning, the crusades had secular aims (unproclaimed) and far-reaching sociopolitical consequences that gradually overshadowed their religious nature. The Catholic Church constantly exhorted the crusaders to maintain the purity of their religious purpose, but their religious purposes went mostly unfulfilled.

Against this backdrop of events, it is easy to see why the Percival story took such hold of the collective European imagination. Substitute the Holy Sepulchre for the Holy Grail, and Percival's quest becomes a parable of the crusades. Percival succeeds in his quest when he returns to the Christian beliefs that motivated his search for the Grail in the first place. Victory for the crusaders would be possible, too, if they would dedicate themselves solely to the religious purposes that were the crusades' stated aim. The story of Percival is, then, the story of the medieval conscience.

After Chretien's poem, the next great telling of the story occurred in Germany early in the thirteenth century, by Wolfram von Eschenbach. Wolfram, a roving knight who was also a poet, brought a great depth of feeling to the Percival tale, as well as a marked sense of humor. His version (*Parzifal*) is by far the fullest and richest rendering of the Legend. It includes a long introductory section about Percival's father (Gahmuret), and it is distinguished as well by its serious treatment of the monogamous marriage theme, a milestone in the annals of heroic literature.

As for Wolfram, his main source was Chretien's poem, though differences do exist between the French and German versions. The video follows Wolfram's tale in most instances, though characters' names are primarily derived from Chretien. (Ease of pronunciation and remembering dictate the name choices. Chretien's *Blanche Fleur*, for example, becomes in Wolfram the nearly unpronounceable *Condwiramurs*.)

From Germany the Percival story traveled back to the British Isles, to be included finally within Thomas Malory's famous *Morte d'Arthur*, which was published in the latter half

of the fifteenth century. By this point Percival's importance as the Grail-searching character had begun to diminish. The Arthurian legend was being presented with a more nationalistic slant than before. In subsequent versions, such as Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, Percival's function was assumed by a decidedly more English character, Sir Galahad.

For those who are interested in reading the Percival story in its entirety, Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzifal* is recommended.

## Summary

(Background) A king, known as the Fisher King, rules over a kingdom and lives in a castle where the Holy Grail is kept. The Fisher King is wounded and ineffectual: he cannot touch the grail or be healed by it. He was wounded early in adolescence while wandering in a forest. He came upon an empty camp and saw a salmon roasting on a spit. Being hungry, he took a bit of the salmon, and burned his fingers badly: he put his fingers in his mouth to ease the pain, and so tasted a bit of the salmon. His burned fingers became infected. Since that experience, the Fisher King has been confined to a litter—in pain and helpless—and is only happy when he is able to fish. A court fool has prophesied that the Fisher King will only be healed when a wholly innocent fool arrives in the court.

(Our story begins here.) In another country a boy lives with his widowed mother; they live in primitive circumstances; the boy wears homespun clothes, has no schooling, and asks no questions. His name is Percival—"innocent fool," among this name's several meanings. Early in adolescence, Percival sees five knights riding by on horseback and is dazzled by their garb, their armor, and their splendor; he rushes home and tells his mother he has seen five gods and wants to leave home and go with them. His mother weeps, afraid he will suffer the fate of his father and brothers who were killed in pursuit of knightly endeavors. Still she gives him her blessing and three instructions: he must respect all fair maidens, go daily to church where he will receive all the food he needs, and he is not to ask foolish questions.

Percival embarks upon his adventures. Coming upon a splendid tent, he enters, embraces a fair maiden he sees there, takes a ring she wears, and puts it on his own hand. He then eats the banquet laid out on a table—not realizing it has been prepared for the maiden's knight. The maiden begs him to leave, because, if her knight finds him there, he will kill him. Percival then meets the Red Knight who tells him, deceitfully, to go to a nearby castle if he wants to become a knight of King Arthur.

In the court there is a maiden who has not smiled or laughed for six years, and, according to legend, will not do so until a totally innocent fool comes along. Seeing Percival, she bursts into laughter. Percival is knighted by the resident king and told that he may have the horse and armor of the Red Knight, if he can beat him. Percival finds the Red Knight, kills him, takes his armor and puts it on over his homespun clothing. Percival then finds his way to the castle of Gournamonde, who trains him to be a knight. Gournamonde gives Percival two instructions: he must respect women, and when he reaches the Grail Castle he must ask, "Whom does the Grail serve?"

Next Percival meets Blanche Fleur and pledges himself to her. He conquers the army besieging her castle. Percival spends the night with Blanche Fleur, but it is a chaste night.

Percival also goes to the Grail Castle, but fails to ask the right question. The people and castle disappear.

Percival goes on to find a sorrowful maiden whose knight has been killed by the jealous knight of the maiden in the tent, so the death was Percival's fault. She also learns that he has been in the Grail Castle and failed to ask the right question, for which she berates him.

Later, he meets the maiden of the tent. She reminds him of his sins and tells him that the sword he was given at the Fisher King's court will break the first time he uses it, that it can only be mended by the smith who made it, and that it will not break again after it has been mended.

In the meantime, three of King Arthur's knights have been sent to search for Percival. Percival is camping near the castle, and a falcon attacks three geese, one of the geese is wounded, and the blood on the snow reminds Percival of Blanche Fleur. He falls into a trance. Three of Arthur's men find him and unsuccessfully try to persuade him to return to the castle. In combat, he unhorses the first two. Finally, Gawain, the third knight, persuades him in combat to follow them. Percival returns in triumph to be received at the court. In combat with Gawain, Percival's sword was broken as predicted. His triumph, however, is marred by the appearance of a hideous woman who recites all of Percival's sins, and tells him he must search for the Grail Castle again and, this time, ask the right question.

Percival continues his travels for many years, forgetting the Church, Blanche Fleur, and the Grail Castle, until—after many years—he meets some pilgrims who ask him why he is armed on Good Friday. He suddenly remembers all he has forgotten. He goes with the pilgrims to a hermit for confession; Percival is absolved, and told to go to the Grail Castle

immediately. The hermit is the smith of Percival's sword and, as such, he permanently mends the sword.

Percival goes off on his quest again. According to some of the legend endings Percival does eventually find the Holy Grail, does ask the question, "Whom does the Grail serve?" and is told that the Grail serves God. Percival then heals the Fisher King and an era of peace and harmony begins in the land.

In other versions of the Grail/Percival legend, Lohengrin, the "Swan Knight," is the son of Percival. In these versions, especially the German versions (Wolfram von Eschenbach's), it is Lohengrin who finally finds the Holy Grail.

Neither ending is introduced in this program. Percival's search is symbolic of the quest we all have as human beings.

### **Identifying the Life Experience**

Although the specifics of every person's life differ, the experiences of growing and maturing are universal. It is in this way that the story of Percival is the story of everyone's life. Percival becomes a mirror in which each person can see himself or herself.

The common life experiences suggested in the program are

- (1) Becoming independent from home and family,
- (2) "Proving" oneself and finding a role-model,
- (3) Searching for balance and finding love,
- (4) Overcoming obstacles, and
- (5) Balancing dreams with reality.

Adults will resonate with other themes such as

- (1) Passing on values to children,
- (2) Integrating our personalities in order to be loving people, and
- (3) Keeping dreams alive as people mature and age.

### **Applying the Christian Message**

Christian morality and human wholeness are as closely related as God and man in Jesus Christ. Growth in the Christian life requires and implies human growth as well. Perhaps at no other time in a person's life is this so critical as during the period of early

adolescence, when a person is beginning to move from the level of a child to that of an adult.

Many lessons can be drawn from the story of Percival which will enable teenagers to understand and appreciate Christian morality. And parents, trying to deal with their own restless and sometimes rebellious “Percivals” (whether boys or girls), can learn their own lessons from this tale.

Like Percival, a young person must give up the security of the home to make his or her own life. This can mean increasing doses of physical separation; it nearly always means the raising of serious questions about what has been taught and accepted up to that point.

Such questioning is necessary if the teenager is to personally appropriate the Christian way of life. But it is not without its dangers and pitfalls. Sometimes the teenager will temporarily fail.

The story of Percival teaches young people that they must learn to balance their search for independence with the willingness to listen to the wisdom of others. It is when they fail that teens can be made sensitive to the need for the counsel of Christian parents, the guidance of others, and the centuries-old teachings of the Church. When teenagers lose track of life’s goal, when the Holy Grail slips from sight, they must learn how to rediscover that vision again which is contained in a patient study of sacred Scripture, the life of Jesus, and the teachings of the Church.

Adolescence can be a confusing and difficult time for a young Christian. Percival and his story provide a guiding model for growth into Christian adulthood.

### **Suggested Activities for Students**

- (1) Encourage students to research examples of people who have pursued their dreams despite overwhelming odds (people such as Dorothy Day, Helen Keller, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, and Tom Dooley).
- (2) Have students look in the library for various artists’ drawings of the Holy Grail. Have them bring the books to class and pass them around for all to see.
- (3) Have some students do some research on the “Passion Play”—its origins and practice throughout the ages, especially the play at Oberammergau. See if you can locate a movie of a passion play, or, if one is performed in your area, be sure your students know about it.

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

### FOR STUDENTS

- (1) Talk about Percival's awakening to the world outside his home. How sheltered was his life? What are some things that happen to young people today that would parallel his meeting with the knights?
- (2) Percival grew up in a single-parent home; his father was dead. Was his mother protective because of this? Was Percival concerned at all about his mother's needs as he left home? Apply this to single-parent families today and discuss.
- (3) Challenge the students to come up with contemporary symbols which would parallel the symbols of the lance and the sword. (Some possible suggestions for consideration for students: a handgun, a switchblade knife, a wicked tongue, and a sports car as symbols of impulsive destruction; a doctor's scalpel, a measuring cup, an editor's pen, and a police officer's badge as symbols of judgment and control.)
- (4) Ask the students to consider what their "grails" are. Some possibilities:
  - a happy marriage
  - being rich and famous
  - a long and healthy life
  - civic leadership
  - getting through high school
  - going to college
  - a life of service
  - achieving a specific career choice (for example, police officer, doctor, carpenter, and so on)
  - a home in the suburbs with two cars
  - a large family
- (5) What steps do your students feel they have already taken on the journey to becoming who they really want to become?
- (6) Point out how Percival puts the dazzling red armor over his rough tunic. Discuss the symbolism of the tunic (the values Percival received at home) and the symbolism of the armor (what Percival learned from his "Red Knight" experience). Have students identify habits and values they learned from their families which they are proud to possess. Discuss also values they or their friends are "trying on."



- (7) Discuss the possible reasons why Percival forgot the good advice of Gournamonde and remembered only his mother's advice when he arrived at the Grail Castle. Ask your students if they can recall incidents from their own experiences when they have done a similar thing.
- (8) Discuss ways in which we can keep our dreams alive and functioning over a long period of time. Some possibilities:
- Writing them in a journal or diary and rereading them frequently
  - Sharing them with a few close friends and talking about them on occasion
  - Becoming friends with and working with other people who share similar dreams.
- (9) How would you describe a "whole" person? Allow the viewers to share their thoughts, then read them this passage from Morris West's *The Shoes of the Fisherman* (Morrow Pub., New York, 1963):

*Yesterday I met a whole man. It is a rare experience, but always an illuminating and ennobling one. It costs so much to be a full human being that there are very few who have the enlightenment, or the courage, to pay the price...One has to abandon altogether the search for security and reach out to the risk of living with both arms. One has to embrace the world like a lover and yet demand no easy return of love. One has to accept pain as a condition of existence. One has to court doubt and darkness as the cost of knowing. One needs a will stubborn in conflict, but apt always to the total acceptance of every consequence of living and dying.*

- (10) Recall the entire story of Percival. How did his quest continue through his life? How was it a quest of loving? How did he deal with both his wound and his dream? How does his quest mirror ours?
- (11) Discuss Emily Dickinson's line: "But that a dream can die will be a thrust between my ribs forever of hot pain." Why do some dreams die? Why do some people refuse to let dreams die? Why is the death of a dream painful?
- (12) The legend has three endings. Discuss them.
- a. Percival rides away, back on the quest, but we never know the "ending." It's unfinished. Why would this be a good ending? Why is it good if the viewers can end the tale as they wish?
  - b. Percival finds the Grail again, asks the right question, heals the King, lives in the castle, weds Blanche Fleur and they have a child, Lohengrin.
  - c. Lohengrin, Percival's son, finds the Holy Grail.

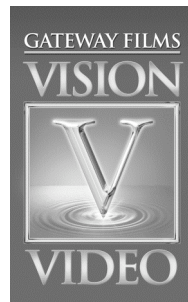
## **FOR ADULTS**

- (1) What is the role of women in Percival's life and how does he treat them?
- (2) What, in your opinion, is the significance of the following characters, symbols, and events? The Red Knight, Gournamonde, Gawain the Green Knight, the Fisher King (Amfortas), the Grail Castle, the lance, the sword, the Good Friday meeting.
- (3) Ask the adults to select some contemporary figures whom they consider as people who have achieved their "dreams." Talk about these modern-day Percivals. What is it we admire in them?

### **Concluding Comments**

As followers of Christ we are both inspired and challenged by his life. Jesus is our goal, our Grail, and living the Christian life is our quest. As we try to lead a Christian life, we often find ourselves falling short of the mark, and we come into contact with other people who take advantage of us or consider us fools as we try to pursue our quest. If, as we pursue our dream, we keep the example of Jesus primary in our minds and hearts, we have a true heritage to pass on to our children.

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