

FROM THE PRODUCERS OF THE BLIND AND GOD'S NOT DEAD

AVERAGE JOE

THE UNWAVERING TRUE STORY



DISCUSSION GUIDE

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AVERAGE JOE tells the unwavering true story of Coach Joe Kennedy, a high school football coach who gained national attention when he was fired for his practice of praying at midfield after every game. What began as a simple gesture of faith and gratitude became a point of intense legal and societal contention. When Coach Joe refused to be silenced or compromised, his story became a powerful example of standing firm in faith amidst opposition. His journey, much like the spiritual battles many believers face, highlights the importance of commitment, integrity, and perseverance.

In **AVERAGE JOE**, we see the reality of spiritual warfare, where our conflict is not against societal or legal systems but a deeper struggle. This aligns clearly with the words of the apostle Paul:

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. - Ephesians 6:12

While Coach Joe's immediate challenge involved public scrutiny and legal disputes, the larger battle was one of faith—standing against spiritual opposition that sought to suppress the expression of his relationship with God.

In this discussion guide, we will unpack not only the narrative of Coach Joe's journey but also the broader implications for Christians today. How do we remain steadfast in our faith when faced with external pressures? How do we navigate the tension between public life and private faith? And what can we learn from Coach Joe's perseverance in holding to his convictions, despite the cost?

Through this discussion guide, may we be reminded that the battle is not physical but spiritual, and our greatest weapon is our faith in God. Be strengthened and encouraged as you "put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand" (Ephesians 6:13).

AVERAGE JOE is available in theaters beginning October 11, 2024, in churches October 21, 2024 through the end of November, and through other channels afterwards. This film will inspire and challenge you to stand strong and fight for your faith—no matter the cost. For more information on how to view this film, visit AverageJoeMovie.com.

This Discussion Guide was created in partnership with XO Publishing.



**This guide contains spoilers,
and is intended for use after a group has seen the film.**

DISCUSSION 1: A ROUGH START

*The Lord is close to the brokenhearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit. - Psalms 34:18*

RECAP

Growing up, Joe faced intense rejection and instability. His early school years were filled with frequent fights, detentions, and expulsions. Joe's adoptive parents provided food and shelter but little emotional support or connection. The only bright spot in Joe's life was his next-door neighbor Denise. He fell in love with her at first sight (at the age of nine!), and they bonded over their traumatic home lives. Denise introduced Joe to the concept of prayer, and even though he wasn't sure about God, Joe knew there was something special about Denise.

Unwanted and unloved, Joe was sent away by his adoptive parents to live at an all-boys home. When Joe tried to return home, he found the door locked. A neighbor revealed that his family had moved, leaving him feeling even more abandoned. With nowhere else to go, Joe returned to the all-boys home, ready to keep fighting his way through life. One of the leaders could see the pain in Joe's eyes and using the example of an ugly but surviving tree, the older man shared, "God doesn't make throw-aways."

REFLECTION

- How do childhood challenges shape the way we handle adversity as adults?
- In what ways did Joe's rough upbringing prepare him for the challenges he would face later in life?
- How does faith help overcome feelings of rejection and inadequacy?

DISCUSSION 2: A NEW IDENTITY

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters. - Colossians 3:23

RECAP

After a childhood filled with rejection and hardship, the United States Marine Corps provided Joe with something invaluable: an identity and sense of accomplishment that no one could take away from him. For the first time, Joe felt that he had truly earned something on his own merits. The discipline, camaraderie, and sense of purpose he gained in the Marines helped him develop a new confidence and resilience that would shape his future.

When Joe's unit leader commanded the men to stomp on the unit's flag, almost all complied. But Joe refused to dishonor the flag, even though the consequence for disobedience was endless push-ups. Motivated by the passion and conviction of their brother-in-arms, Joe's fellow Marines stopped stomping and joined him for push-ups on the ground. The unit leader recognized Joe's conviction and leadership and presented him with the unit's flag. This pivotal moment would stay with Joe forever and serve as the foundation for even greater challenges to come.

REFLECTION

- What does it mean to earn something in your life that no one can take from you?
- How can we apply the discipline and resilience learned from difficult experiences to our spiritual lives?
- In what ways did the Marines prepare Joe to stand firm in his faith later in life?

DISCUSSION 3: A SECOND CHANCE

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. - Proverbs 3:5–6

RECAP

Joe tried to keep in touch with Denise while he was deployed to the Middle East, but the mental and emotional turmoil of war made it difficult. When he found out that she had married someone else, he was devastated. Joe's response was to marry Denise's cousin, but the marriage wouldn't survive. Joe felt lost and unsure about his future, and the scars of war—both literal and figurative—definitely took a toll on him.

After Denise fled her abusive marriage, she and Joe lost contact for a decade. They eventually reunited and rekindled their relationship, and they were thrilled to get married and begin a new life together. But Joe's internal battle with self-worth, plus financial hardships and emotional burdens, brought a lot of challenges to the relationship. Finally, Joe decided to do something he'd never done before: ask for help. He gave his life to Christ, and the couple began to face their challenges with a fresh sense of hope and unity.

REFLECTION

- How can unresolved emotional wounds from the past affect current relationships?
- Why is it important for couples to rely on faith during times of struggle?
- How does surrendering to God change the way we approach personal and relational difficulties?

DISCUSSION 4: A PROMISE MADE

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. - 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18

RECAP

After retiring from 20 years in the Marines, Joe was not entirely sure what the next part of his life would look like. An unexpected offer to be a high school football coach seemed random and almost ridiculous, but Joe decided to take a step of faith. He promised the Lord that no matter what happened, he would give Him thanks at the end of every game. It was a simple, yet sincere commitment born out of gratitude.

It took some time to gain the trust of his players and fellow coaches, but “Coach Joe” became a trusted and admired leader. His genuine care for the boys went beyond football; he sought to understand their struggles, both on and off the field. As he encouraged them to push through their own battles, he modeled resilience and faith, reminding them that their worth wasn't defined by wins or losses but by their character and effort. As he promised God, Coach Joe knelt at midfield to pray at the end of every game, regardless of the outcome. He never invited or pressured anyone to join him, but players asked to accompany him because they recognized there was something special about Coach Joe and his relationship with God.

REFLECTION

- When have you felt called to take a risk or try something new, even if it seemed uncertain?
- What qualities are essential for effective leadership, whether in sports or other areas of life?
- How can public displays of faith bring positive change to a community?

DISCUSSION 5: A COMMITMENT KEPT

But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened. - 1 Peter 3:14

RECAP

Coach Joe's public prayers began drawing more and more attention—and scrutiny. This public expression of faith upset some community members who believed it violated the separation of church and state. The Bremerton School District began to pressure Coach Joe to stop praying in public, and they forbade him to pray with his players. Coach Joe was willing to avoid the appearance of coercion (though he knew he wasn't forcing anyone to pray), but he was determined to continue with his midfield prayers. He had made a promise to the Lord, and he was going to keep it. Plus, Coach Joe believed the school district's demand infringed upon his First Amendment right to freedom of religious expression, making it a spiritual and legal issue. This life-long fighter wasn't about to back down.

The legal battle of Kennedy v. Bremerton School District was off to a fierce start, and everything in Joe's life became more difficult. He lost his coaching position, and he almost lost his marriage too. Denise could not understand why her husband wouldn't just pray privately in the locker room, especially because her career in Bremerton's human resources department was put at risk. Judge after judge ruled in favor of the school district, but Joe refused to surrender. He and his legal team continued to appeal to higher courts until there was only one court left: the Supreme Court of the United States. Would the years of fighting amidst emotional exhaustion finally pay off?

REFLECTION

- Why do you think Coach Joe's simple act of prayer became such a point of contention?
- Have you ever experienced opposition because of your faith? How did you handle it?
- What do you think Coach Joe hoped to achieve by refusing to give up, beyond keeping his job?

DISCUSSION 6: A RIGHTEOUS REWARD

Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn, your vindication like the noonday sun. - Psalms 37:5–6

RECAP

It took many years and multiple attempts for Kennedy v. Bremerton School District to be officially accepted and ruled upon by the Supreme Court, but the day finally arrived for Coach Joe and his legal team. In June 2022, a 6–3 decision was announced: Joe Kennedy’s prayers on the Bremerton football field—even in his capacity as a public-school employee—were acts of religious expression, and as such, they were protected by the First Amendment. Bremerton had infringed upon Joe’s constitutional rights by disciplining him for expressing his faith in a way that did not coerce students or disrupt school activities.

This monumental ruling was a win for Joe Kennedy, but it was also so much more for the Marine-turned-football coach. As a member of the United States military, Joe had fought for the rights of every American, not just Christians. Freedom of religious expression is one of those rights, and he simply could not sit by and watch it be taken away from himself or anyone else. It was a grueling battle, but the outcome was a crucial victory for all Americans and the generations to follow.

REFLECTION

- How did Coach Joe’s commitment to his faith influence his identity as both a coach and a veteran?
- What implications does this ruling have for future cases involving religious expression in public schools and institutions?
- Do you think the battle would have been worth the cost even if the Supreme Court had ruled against Coach Joe? Why or why not?

DISCUSSION 7: A BRIGHT LIGHT

You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. - Matthew 5:14–16

RECAP

Joe Kennedy's journey highlights the true cost of discipleship. In following Jesus, Joe was willing to face personal and professional loss, reminding us of Jesus' call to take up our cross and follow Him (see Luke 9:23). Joe's faith became a testimony to others, demonstrating the power of living out one's beliefs openly. The visibility of his actions sparked controversy, but it also inspired many who saw his courage and dedication. As Christians, we are called to let our light shine before others, not for recognition but so that people may see God through us. Joe's willingness to stand firm in his faith provides a powerful example of how a simple act of prayer can have a ripple effect on those around us.

James 1:22 says, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." Joe could have chosen the easy path, giving up his public prayers to keep his job and avoid conflict. However, his commitment to his faith wouldn't allow him to do so. Joe's refusal to compromise on his beliefs reminds us of the importance of standing firm in our convictions, no matter the cost. His story is a powerful reminder that living with integrity often requires sacrifice, but it also brings honor to God. May we never forget the apostle Paul's encouragement: "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" (Galatians 6:9).

REFLECTION

- Why is it important for Christians to not only talk about their faith but also live it out?
- How can you maintain integrity in a world that often encourages compromise?
- How do you handle situations where fear tries to overwhelm your faith?

ABOUT XO MARRIAGE

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