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Bridge on the River Kwai: The Backstory

According to the TV, the 2025 Academy Awards were presented last night. Though I haven't seen a movie in a theater this century, I do have my old favorites. One of these is the WWII classic "Bridge on the River Kwai." It's a fictional account of the struggles faced by Allied POWs held by the Japanese in the jungles of Burma.

Reverend Anne reminded us recently about the importance of backstories. While the movie won the 1957 Oscar for Best Picture, the true but lesser-known account of how faith grew and sustained these men in the most desperate of circumstances is equally compelling.

Scotsman Ernest Gordon was a Captain in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders when he became a prisoner-of-war after the fall of Singapore in 1942. He was held captive at the infamous labor camp where the bridge on the River Kwai was actually constructed.

The prisoners were terribly mistreated by the Japanese. Gordon was left for dead only to survive through the efforts of two fellow prisoners who nursed him back to health; one a Catholic, the other Methodist. These three laymen started the camp's first Bible studies and worship services. This spark of faith was nurtured over the years and after the war Gordon became a Presbyterian minister and served many years as Dean of Chapel

at Princeton University.

In his book, wishfully entitled *To End All Wars*, Gordon graphically describes an incident when the prisoners were being moved to a new camp and encountered a boxcar full of wounded Japanese soldiers. They were filthy, covered in blood and mud. No longer fit for combat, to the Japanese they were a burden, damaged goods, abandoned and left without medical care.

At this point Gordon had a sad epiphany regarding his captors. "We could understand now why the Japanese were so cruel to their prisoners. If they didn't care a tinker's damn for their own, why should they care for us?"

What happened next helped to restore his faith in his fellow man. Upon hearing the pitiful moans of the wounded Japanese soldiers, the British POWs, unhealthy and weak themselves, left their boxcar. They crossed the tracks to clean the wounds and share their meager water rations with the enemy. To Gordon it was a true-life example of the Good Samaritan in the most dire of circumstances.

"I regarded my comrades with wonder. Eighteen months ago they would have joined readily in the destruction of our captors had they fallen into their hands. Now these same men were dressing their enemy's wounds. We had experienced a moment of grace there in those blood-stained railway cars."

Thankfully, most of us will not suffer as these soldiers did. We will though face everyday challenges where it will be awkward, politically incorrect or simply inconvenient to practice our Christian faith as Scripture and our conscience direct us. Hopefully we can be motivated to do the right thing by remembering these men whose story may not have won an Oscar but much more importantly, inspired others to more faithful lives.

Matthew 25:40 - *And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me'.*

~Written by Jim Trent

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8190 Lincoln Rd. Beulah, MI 49617

231.882.4241

www.benziestandrews.com



Benzie St. Andrews | 8190 Lincoln Rd | Beulah, MI 49617 US

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