

To End All Wars (2001)

Rated R Our content rating: V-7; L-4; S/N-1.

"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?"

Matthew 5:43-46

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

Matthew 6:12

Three journeys of the spirit are To End All Wars (On DVD) powerfully portrayed in this adaptation of Ernest Gordon's classic spiritual memoir, Through the Valley of the Kwai. One of them, that of Captain Ernest Gordon (Ciaran McMenamin), is a fact based one: the others, Maj. Ian Campbell's (Robert Carlyle) and Lt. Jim "Yanker" Reardon's (Kiefer Sutherland), are fictional, added to show the contrast in the choices that people make when faced with extreme cruelty and death.

Young Ernest Gordon, a newly graduated teacher at the beginning of WW 2, joins the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders

and is posted to Singapore. When that city is about to fall to the Japanese, he and some others flee in a boat, hoping to reach India. (This attempt, an epic adventure in itself detailed in the book, is left out of the film.) Instead, they are captured and sent to Chungkai camp in the Burmese jungle, where they are forced to labor without adequate rations or medical treatment on the infamous "Railway of Death." Unlike the soldiers in the fictional movie *Bridge On the River Kwai*, the prisoners did not proudly work on the bridge to demonstrate British superiority: Gordon relates in his book that they did everything they could to sabotage the structure, including using timbers infested with termites. As we see, all too painfully at times in the film, thousands of prisoners died pushing the railroad through the dense jungle and rocky ridges along the River Kwai.

At the beginning of the film we see British Col. James Maclean (James Cosmos) and his aide Maj. Ian Campbell being told by Lt. Col. Nagatomo (Shu Nakjima) and Capt. Nouguchi (Masayuki Yui) that they have 18 months to build 420 kilometers of railroad through the difficult terrain. When Col. MacLean protests that officers are not allowed, according to the Geneva Convention, to do manual labor, and he refuses to sign documents that pledge them not to attempt to escape, the enraged Japanese commandant executes him on the spot. The loyal Campbell is shaken by this—indeed, almost goes berserk—and vows that he will exact vengeance. He sets into motion a plan to organize the prisoners and seize control of the camp at an opportune time.

Long-time prisoner Dusty Miller (Mark Strong) and others argue against such a plan, pointing out that the jungle is their captor, as well as the Japanese, that such a plan would only bring more suffering and death. When malnutrition and a host of diseases attack Gordon, he is taken to the hut where the ill await death, there being almost no medicines—indeed, the place is dubbed "The House of Death." The whole camp is

gripped in a despairing hopelessness that saps those stricken by illness of any desire to live. However, Dusty and some of his mates visit Gordon and bring him small gifts of food and a Bible. They move Gordon to a specially built small hut, where he will not have to look at the dead and dying all day. Slowly Gordon begins to recover, discovering that the food that is restoring him to life was not extra, but from Dusty's own meager rations.

The once agnostic Gordon slowly awakens to faith as he converses with Dusty, who tells him about his once violent past. As more soldiers make a similar journey, the mood of the camp changes from darkness to light, from death to life, and more slowly, from hatred to love. Gordon helps start, with a few tattered books, a jungle university. His symposium on Plato deals, appropriately enough, with the question of what is a just man? Gordon also helps form an orchestra and a "church without walls" where the teachings of Jesus are taught and discussed fervently.

Yanker, called that because he is the only American in the camp, represents another way of coping, the good ole Yankee way of sharp trading. He manages to find sources of scarce supplies, cigarettes and luxuries through the natives living nearby. His deals always wind up in his favor. When he is caught and punished, it is his stubbornness and raging anger that help him survive being staked to the ground under for days without water under the blazing sun.

Meanwhile, Campbell goes ahead with his plan to kill their guards and seize control of the camp. So upset is he over what he regards as Gordon's capitulation to the enemy by setting up a university and church, instead of joining with him, that he betrays Gordon to the guards, who come and seize the books and forbid the prisoners from gathering for classes. They still meet clandestinely. Oddly, the Japanese discover that the classes had strengthened the prisoners so that they had become better workers, so the books are returned, and the classes

allowed to resume. But matters soon come to a head when Campbell tries to implement his plan, leading to the ultimate sacrifice by one of the men, and a transformation of Yanker. Campbell refuses to let go of his anger and hatred, his fate and that of Capt. Nouguchi showing the terrible consequences of holding onto the thirst for vengeance.

Scenes that'll preach/teach:

1) Dusty at the Colonel's burial service saying, "There is suffering before glory; there is a cross before a crown." We see a CU of Gordon's face, on which are registered a struggle of pain and grief.

2) Gordon's question in the "House of Death" to Dusty as to why he is caring for him. Dusty does not reply, at least not in words. It is his continual acts of love, growing out of his faith, that is his answer.

3) Dusty's words to Gordon, "You know, a man can stand an incredible amount of pain and suffering if he has hope." 4) The shovel incident with the incredible sacrifice and its bizarre outcome.

4) Gordon's and his fellow Christians' ignoring the orders from their superiors and the Japanese not to give water to the wounded Japanese in the truck.

Note: *This review was written over 10 years ago. A more detailed review with suggested scenes and over a dozen discussion questions will be in my new book Blessed Are the Filmmakers, which ReadtheSpirit will publish in 2014.*