

CARRY THE FIRE



SERMON SERIES FOR
THE
ROAD



Dear Viewers,

Cormac McCarthy has a storied history of writing novels that showcase the barren deserts of humanity. Author of ten books, including *Blood Meridian*, *All the Pretty Horses* and *No Country for Old Men*, McCarthy threads his work with elements of desolation, death, intensity, anger and depravity.

Known as a reclusive writer, offering little in the way of explanation and plenty in the way of intrigue, the intent of his work is often questioned and readers find themselves supported more by their own conclusions than McCarthy's intentions. With such flexibility for reader interpretation, the religious aspect of McCarthy's work is frequently debated. Hosts of readers scrutinize his words hoping to once and for all make clear the enigmatic writer. His most recent novel, *The Road*, now adapted to film, continues the trend.

But this sermon series does not exist to pinpoint the intention of McCarthy, but rather the intention of the gospel. Throughout history, God has used modern means to illustrate an eternal message. All people and all things have been, and can be used as, vehicles for gospel distribution and reception. Cormac McCarthy and *The Road* do not prove immune. *The Road*, intentionally or not, challenges humanity. Described as a "searing, post-apocalyptic novel," it serves as a powerful parable that evaluates what the world would be like should humanity run unchecked. It also shows the persistent hope that still exists in unfathomable wreckage.

The following set of sermons demonstrates echoes of the gospel in *The Road* and how the Christian message can be found under even the most unlikely stones. The impact of this film is not in the answers given, but the questions presented. These sermons will be a catalyst for you to equip and empower your congregation to use this media/cultural event to have a spiritual conversation – beyond information – with a friend or relative who might never come to church, but would attend a movie. I hope this guide encourages you and your community to intentionally dig into this story, and in turn the Bible, with a newfound thrill.

There are certainly avid witnesses to be found in the literary world.

Carry the fire,



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The Road, intentionally or not, challenges humanity.



Sermon One

Cultural Engagement Points People to Christ

I was recently in a local coffee shop enjoying a cup of dark roast while reading a copy of *The Road*. A fellow coffee connoisseur inquired about the book, curious after hearing so many individuals talk about it. *What was it about?* He wanted to know. *Was McCarthy as captivating as they say? As dark and imposing?*

I put the novel down and set to sharing the story so many have gravitated toward, leading my new friend through the post-apocalyptic narrative of a father and son caught in the midst of the greatest environmental disaster known to mankind. When I finished, his response was instinctive: Tell me more.

Without any intention of my own, Cormac McCarthy's novel opened up an avenue of communication to share the wake-up call of the gospel with a complete stranger. By engaging in modern-day culture, I had a new means to relate to and foster a relationship with others. The man and I continued our conversation and coffee drinking while talking about the future of the world and McCarthy's cautionary tale that shakes individuals awake in their life, begging them to think about the world God has created for humanity and what we're doing with it.

This is a small incident in a beautiful epidemic where Christian principles are being taught through cultural engagement. There is opportunity to witness where there is opportunity to connect.

I. Cultural Engagement

Chuck Colson once said that "God cares not only about redeeming souls but also about restoring his creation...Our job is not only to build up the church but also to build a society to the glory of God...we are called to help sustain and renew his creation, to uphold the created institutions of family and society, to pursue science and scholarship, to create works of art and beauty, and to heal and help those suffering from the results of the Fall."

Engaging culture is essential in order to:

1. Define and cement one's own beliefs
2. Understand society's sins, shortcomings and weakness, while likewise identifying those same struggles in one's self
3. Discover how to effectively communicate the gospel in the modern world
4. Understand the questions people need answered

Mediums to engage culture:

1. Business
2. Government
3. Media
4. Church
5. Arts & Entertainment
6. Education
7. Social Sector

II. Cultural Transformation

"If we produce thousands of new church-communities that regularly attract and engage secular people, that seek the common good of the whole city especially the poor, and that produce thousands of Christians who write plays, make movies, express creative journalism, begin effective and productive new businesses, use their money for others, and produce cutting-edge scholarship and literature we will see our vision for the city realized and whole society changed as a result."

~Tim Keller, Redeemer Presbyterian, NYC

By engaging culture in Christian doctrine, societal change is possible. God calls all individuals to be discerning witnesses that use their channels of influence to spread an essential message and take part in the active dialogue. Through discernment and practice, one should continually evaluate and implement:

1. The responsibility of the church in cultural transformation
2. The responsibility of the individual in cultural transformation

Life Application

Society and culture's Achilles' heel is the need to understand all and control all. The gospel alleviates this continually unsatisfied need – answering the essential questions and giving individuals the ability to surrender to the unknowns.

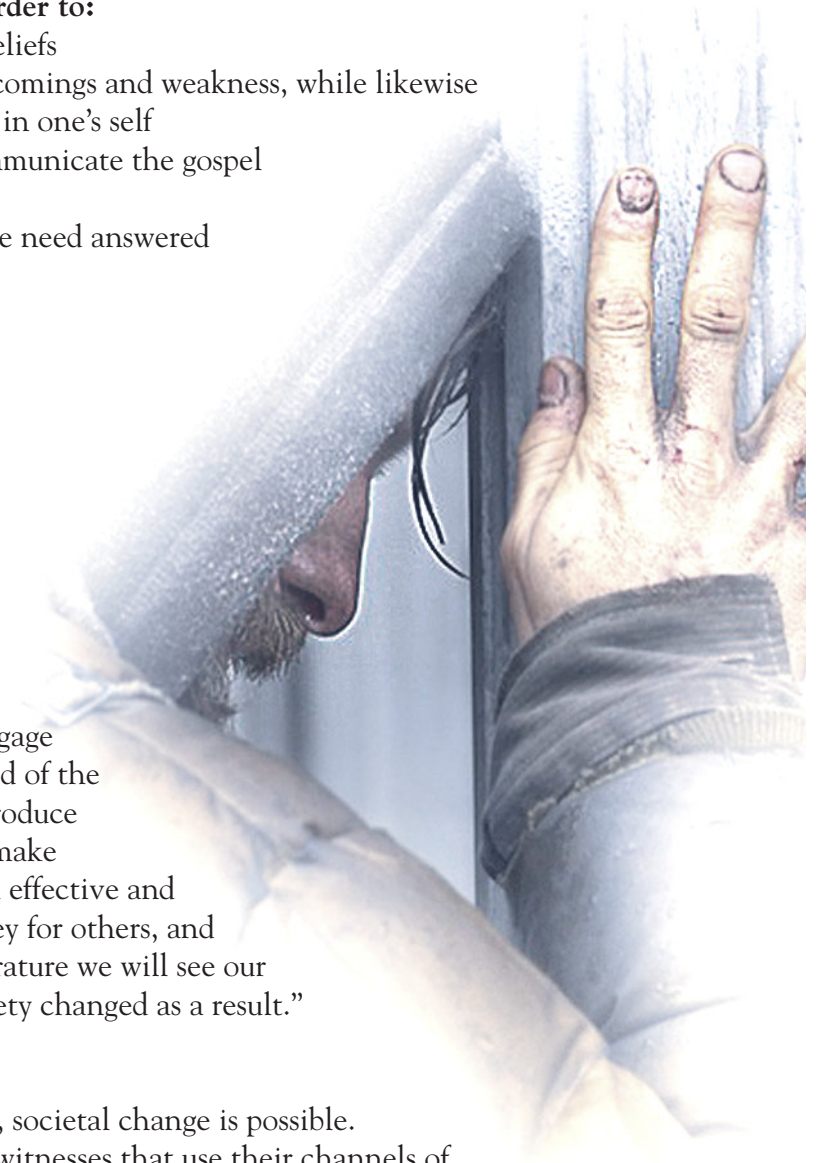
Answers to Life's Great Questions with the Word of God:

1. Where did I come from? God
2. What has gone wrong? Sin
3. How do we fix the problem? Redemption

Action Steps to Engage:

1. Engage in cultural movements for the good of mankind.
2. Relate truth to culture.
3. Answer the questions people are asking.

Use YOUR channels of influence to spread an essential message and take part in the active dialogue.



Sermon Two

The Environmental Road

Acts 17:22-31

Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Road*, presents a post-apocalyptic story of a father and son who walk through a world that promises little hope for life. A bleak landscape, incinerated and saturated with ash, offers a world void of growth. Everything is reduced to its lowest threshold of survival. While the backdrop of *The Road* is desolate and corrupt, the cause of the destructiveness is not revealed in the story. What is clear is that the biosphere has collapsed and the fragile ecosystem humanity enjoys is beyond repair. It's through this setting of abandoned fruitfulness that *The Road* becomes a cautionary tale – a wake-up call to appreciate, care for and enjoy the world God has created.

I. God and the Environment

The environment is a key cornerstone of the gospel, intimately linked with creation, preservation and growth. As Christians, we need to tend the world and its inhabitants because:

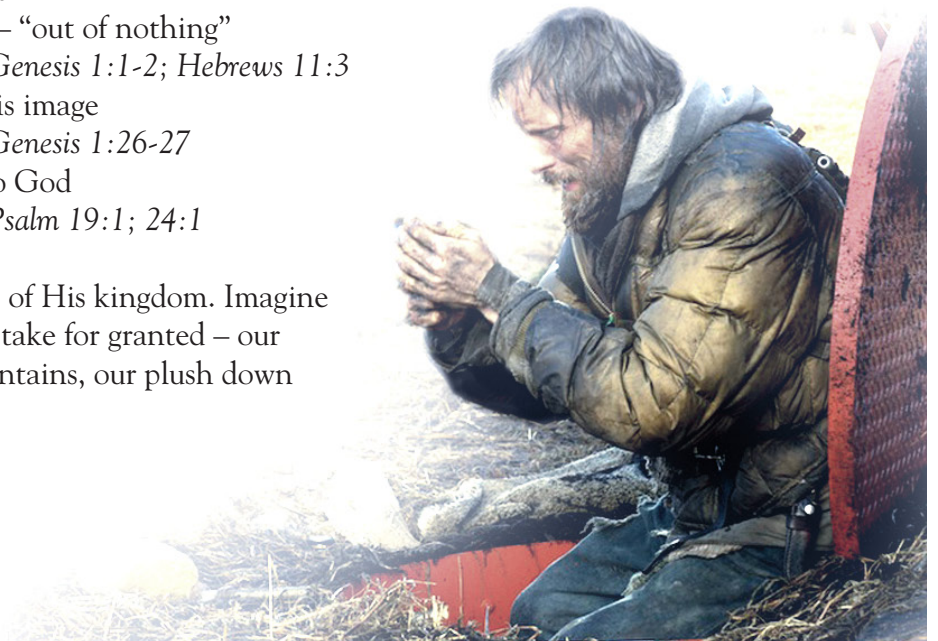
- Creation points to the existence of God
 - *Supporting Scripture:* (Gen 1-2; Job 38-41; Ps 19, 24, 104; Rom 1:18-20; Col 1:16-17)
- We become relevant to society when we are informed and involved in preserving the environment
 - *Supporting Scripture:* (Lev. 25:1-12; Isa. 5:8-10; Job 38:25-28; Ps 104:27-30; Matt 6:26, 10:29)
- Future generations depend on us

II. Mankind and Creationism

Mankind is very religious, as religion affects every area of life – physically, mentally, environmentally, financially, etc. Permeating all sides of our existence, the true God can be known through His creation, not only of the world, but also through mankind that inhabits it. God is the creator of all things as:

- God created ex nihilo – “out of nothing”
 - *Supporting Scripture:* Genesis 1:1-2; Hebrews 11:3
- God created man in His image
 - *Supporting Scripture:* Genesis 1:26-27
- Creation points man to God
 - *Supporting Scripture:* Psalm 19:1; 24:1

God has entrusted us as stewards of His kingdom. Imagine a world without those things we take for granted – our rushing rivers and towering mountains, our lush down grass and thriving animals.



In *The Road*, McCarthy takes away the plenty God has given us to paint a picture of the bleak world that remains. It is a wake-up call for all to respect and care for the world God has created. Through its lens of destruction, readers are able to peer into a future that could evolve should humanity allow sin to intensify and overcome.

“He dreamt of walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them he and the child and the sky was aching blue but he was learning how to wake himself from just such siren worlds.”

“Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.”

“Perhaps in the world’s destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made. Oceans, mountains. The ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be. The sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular. The silence.”

“It took two days to cross that ashen scabland. The road beyond fell away on every side. It’s snowing, the boy said. He looked at the sky. A single gray flake sifting down. He caught it in his hand and watched it expire there like the last host of christendom.”

“He thought if he lived long enough the world at last would be lost. Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory.”

“In those first years the roads were peopled with refugees shrouded up in their clothing.



Wearing masks and goggles, sitting in their rags by the side of the road like ruined aviators. Their barrows heaped with shoddy. Towing wagons or carts. Their eyes bright in their skulls. Creedless shells of men tottering down the causeways like migrants in a feverland. The frailty of everything revealed at last. Old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness and night. The last instance of a thing takes the class with it. Turns out the light and is gone. Look around you. Ever is a long time. But the boy knew what he knew. That ever is no time at all.”

Supporting Quotes from Outside Sources

The British environmentalist George Monbiot has called McCarthy one of the “50 people who could save the planet.” In a review he wrote, “A few weeks ago I read what I believe is the most important environmental book ever written. It is not *Silent Spring*, *Small Is Beautiful* or even *Walden*. It contains no graphs, no tables, no facts, figures, warnings, predictions or even arguments. Nor does it carry a single dreary sentence, which, sadly, distinguishes it from most environmental literature. It is a novel, first published a year ago, and it will change the way you see the world.”

“Unnecessary waste and pollution degrades and spoils the creation’s ability to glorify to the Creator. To exercise dominion over nature does not entitle man to exploit – we hold it in trust.” – *Lorenzini*

“Ecological destruction interferes with and silences the worship of God.”
– *Tony Campolo*



Sermon Three

Carrying the Fire

“A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.”

-Luke 6:45 (NKJV)

The Road is established as a post-apocalyptic novel of contrasts – horrific destruction is paired next to warm, critical moments of hope and faith. Essential to this dynamic of fall and redemption is McCarthy’s use of fire to distinguish good from evil. Those who “carry the fire” are the “good guys” and those who don’t are the “bad guys” – a basic premise that becomes remarkably powerful in McCarthy’s story.

The father character in *The Road* identifies the “good guys” as those who keep trying. In a world so clearly flawed and so seemingly doomed, the good persist in carrying the fire, while the remainder of society retreats to a bottom-feeding level of inhumanity, greed and corruption.

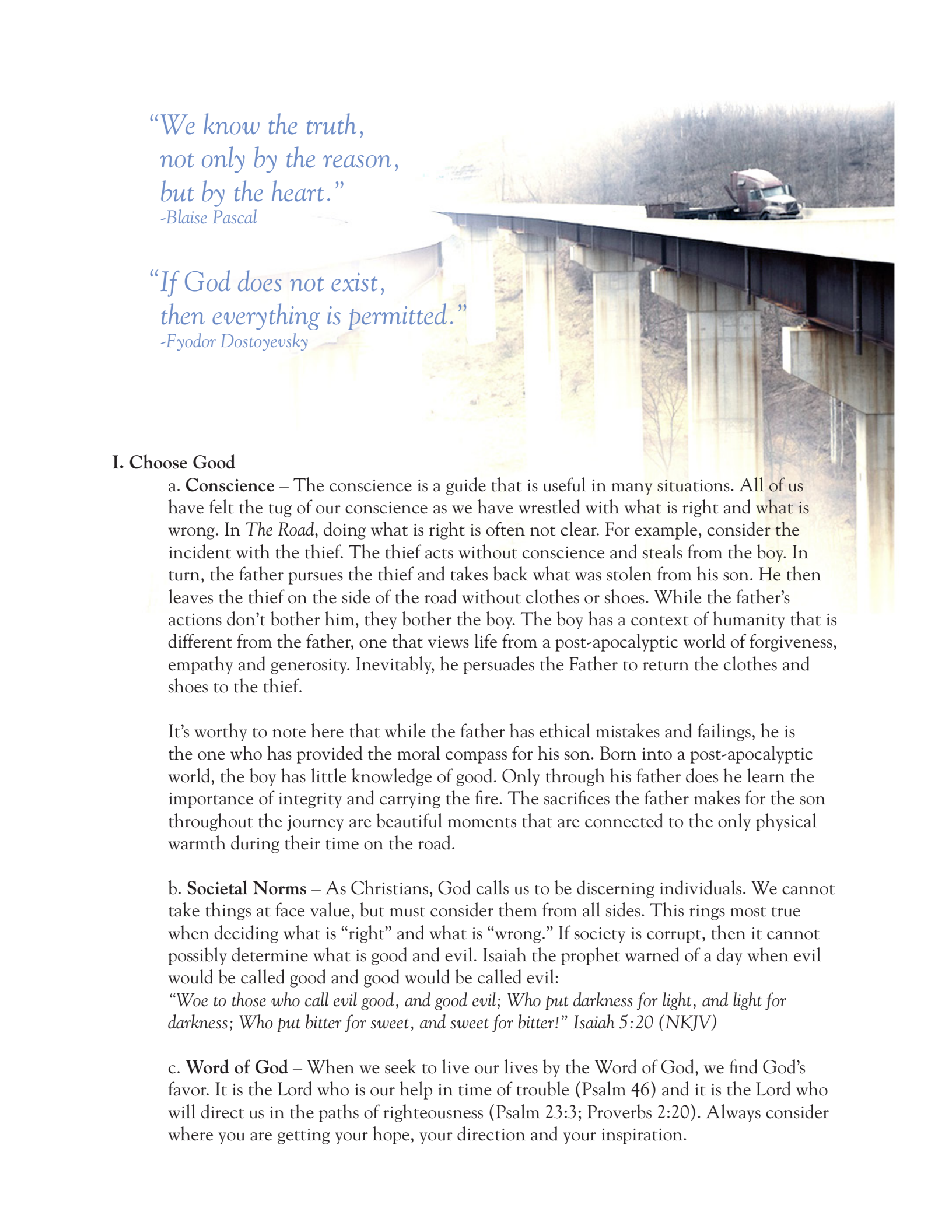
But “carrying the fire” is more than persistence and continuity – it is hope wed with human goodness. The fire is a symbol of a life that is lived on a higher, nobler level. It is the triumph of good over evil. And it is the responsibility of those who carry the fire to carry it faithfully. McCarthy points to this numerous times in dialogue between the Father and Son characters, but never more adamantly than here:



“We’re going to be okay, aren’t we Papa? Yes. We are.
And nothing bad is going to happen to us. That’s right.
Because we’re carrying the fire.
Yes. Because we’re carrying the fire.”

The Big Questions to Consider:

1. How do you distinguish good from evil?
2. Does the situation determine what is right and wrong?
3. Or is there a higher standard of right and wrong?



*“We know the truth,
not only by the reason,
but by the heart.”*
-Blaise Pascal

*“If God does not exist,
then everything is permitted.”*
-Fyodor Dostoyevsky

I. Choose Good

a. **Conscience** – The conscience is a guide that is useful in many situations. All of us have felt the tug of our conscience as we have wrestled with what is right and what is wrong. In *The Road*, doing what is right is often not clear. For example, consider the incident with the thief. The thief acts without conscience and steals from the boy. In turn, the father pursues the thief and takes back what was stolen from his son. He then leaves the thief on the side of the road without clothes or shoes. While the father’s actions don’t bother him, they bother the boy. The boy has a context of humanity that is different from the father, one that views life from a post-apocalyptic world of forgiveness, empathy and generosity. Inevitably, he persuades the Father to return the clothes and shoes to the thief.

It’s worthy to note here that while the father has ethical mistakes and failings, he is the one who has provided the moral compass for his son. Born into a post-apocalyptic world, the boy has little knowledge of good. Only through his father does he learn the importance of integrity and carrying the fire. The sacrifices the father makes for the son throughout the journey are beautiful moments that are connected to the only physical warmth during their time on the road.

b. **Societal Norms** – As Christians, God calls us to be discerning individuals. We cannot take things at face value, but must consider them from all sides. This rings most true when deciding what is “right” and what is “wrong.” If society is corrupt, then it cannot possibly determine what is good and evil. Isaiah the prophet warned of a day when evil would be called good and good would be called evil:

“Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; Who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; Who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!” Isaiah 5:20 (NKJV)

c. **Word of God** – When we seek to live our lives by the Word of God, we find God’s favor. It is the Lord who is our help in time of trouble (Psalm 46) and it is the Lord who will direct us in the paths of righteousness (Psalm 23:3; Proverbs 2:20). Always consider where you are getting your hope, your direction and your inspiration.



II. Learn from Your Mistakes

There is a major turning point in *The Road* when the Boy begins to teach the Father. On the journey, the Father and Boy encounter a man who calls himself Ely. He is very old and hungry. The Boy is able to see through his own fear and grasp the possibility of building a relationship with another human being. He wants to help Ely, while the Father, distrustful, does not.

The argument between the Father and Son demonstrates growth on the part of the Boy. He is becoming a carrier of the fire. He is a new generation that will live on a higher level than those who were from the world that once was.

In order to grow in our awareness, we need to be:

- Humble
Supporting Scripture: Proverbs 29:23; Romans 12:16; James 4:6,10; I Peter 5:5-6
- Teachable
Supporting Scripture: Psalm 25:12; 32:8; 143:10; Proverbs 9:9; Isaiah 28:9

III. Experience the New Birth

In order to “carry the fire,” one needs to experience the new birth (John 3:3). It is essential to realize that human goodness is not enough and religion is not enough. Too often in life, we rely on what we can do and control rather than what Christ can do through us. Man is a spiritual being who needs to encounter the living God. It is through the understanding of salvation and the providential nature of God that we as humans are equipped and able to “carry the fire.”

In *The Road*, the Father came to realize the son was different: “He turned and looked at the boy. Maybe he understood for the first time that to the boy himself he was an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed.”

In the same way, when you put your faith in Christ, you are different. You become a new creature (2 Corinthians 5:17) where the world no longer looks the same. Your citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20).

Life Application

- Doing good is a choice given to every person.
- Carrying the fire is more than persistence.
- You can experience the new birth.

*“Do not pray for easy lives,
pray to be stronger men and
women, Do not pray for tasks
equal to your powers, pray for
powers equal to your tasks.”*

-Philip Brooks



Sermon Four

Forgetting the Past

Philippians 3:12-16

The heaviest thing in the world is past regret and pain. It haunts and debilitates, slowing life to a trickle, while evaporating the essential God-given element of hope. You cannot move forward in your life if you insist on keeping one foot in the past.

The Road presents the audience with a world that is a shell of its former glory. Gone is the social structure, along with the order and beauty of the world that God created. In this new reality, the whole mission of the father is to journey to the coast in hopes of finding safety and warmth. But the journey isn't easy; the perilous unknown exists in every forward step. The only hope lies in the future. For the father, he must overcome another enemy – his past. If he clings to his mistakes and what he's leaving behind, he will never be able to fully embrace his future glory.

The father is not unlike you and me. Too often the future becomes impossible because of the memories, flashbacks and guilt. But like the father, too, we can choose to move forward. We can choose to embrace God's promise of redemption and take steps into the unknown with confidence and hope.

I. Move in the Right Direction

A. Persistence will lead to power

Often we have heard the phrase by Nietzsche, “What doesn't kill us makes us stronger.” While cliché, certainly, the statement is nonetheless true. When we overcome conflict, we grow as individuals. Problem free lives are easy, yes, but it is the struggles and persistence that help us become better versions of ourselves, more like the people God intends us to be.

“Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambition inspired, and success achieved.”

-Helen Keller



B. Mission is more important than comfort

The Road is a love story between a father and his son. It is testimony to human endurance and hope. But, most importantly, it is about having a mission and the conviction to complete it. The father knows that his mission is to bring his son safely to the coast. And while it's clear that the coast, the end goal, is important, it is worthless without the mission and journey. Likewise, the son has been given the mission to carry the fire. If he wants to reach the other side with integrity, he must 'carry the fire' the entire way. Without a mission and without a purpose, the end goal loses its value. *-Matthew 28:18-20*

C. Difficulties prove your character

In life, there are words and then there are actions. We can all say we are faithful, loyal followers of Christ, but without acting on those beliefs, they become hollow expressions. In *The Road*, love resonates against a backdrop of tragedy. The father and son come across countless impediments and if they weren't committed to their mission and to 'carrying the fire,' they would surely stumble and fail.

In this world we will have challenges and difficulties (John 16:33). They will crush us if we let them. Character only becomes such when it is proven and tested in the trials of life.

II. Don't Let the Past Get in the Way of the Future

A. Misdirected Energy

How many times have we worried about the inconsequential? Been caught up in what to wear on a first date? Been irate over \$20 that fell out of our wallets or overly frustrated by burned steaks at a big dinner? The truth is, every day we let little things make big holes in our existence. We direct our energy toward anger and frustration rather than appreciation and faith.

In an extremely powerful, visual manner, *The Road* demonstrates the fragility of life and what we stand to lose. None of us have any guarantee that we live past today. Our life, we are told, "...is a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away" (James 4:14). Knowing this, how will we direct our energy? What will we focus on and invest in?

B. You Will Jeopardize the Mission

*Not till each loom is silent
And the shuttles cease to fly,
Shall God reveal the pattern
And explain the reason why
The dark threads were as needful
In the weaver's skillful hand
As the threads of gold and silver
For the pattern which He planned*

-Unknown



III. Know What Really Matters

A. Make the Future Bigger than the Past

“No one ever succeeds without taking some deliberate steps in the direction of their dreams. You are on a journey to discover yourself and the place that will provide you with purpose... There is an element of risk in every journey. I suspect that deep down inside of all of us there is a courageous explorer who desperately wants to blaze new trails and discover new land. The risk is part of the appeal. Playing it safe is for those who have never truly lived.

Better to look back on life and to have tried and failed than to look back with regret over what could have been.”

~Passionate Lives & Leaders – The Confidence Principle
James Lucas and Phil Hotsenpiller

B. Look for the Good in Every Situation

We all need a new set of eyes to see the best in every situation. It doesn't matter how difficult life may become – if you look for the good you will find it. In *The Road*, little things become big events. When they find a can of Coke, the father takes the time to watch the boy savor every drop. When they find a stream, they take a bath; it is a wonderful gift. You may not understand or even like what is going on in your life, but that doesn't mean the goodness God has in store for you has disappeared. If you are willing to open yourself up to the possibility of goodness, your very same life will become brighter with the light you've allowed in. (*James 1:2-4*).

Life Application:

- Learn from your past, but do not let it weigh you down. There are tomorrows that need not be burdened with yesterdays.
- Focus on your mission.
- Value every day as a gift from God.