

Les Misérables

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

September 19, 2010

2nd in the six-part series: *St. Andrew at the Movies*

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Luke 7:36–50 (NRSV)

³⁶ One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. ³⁷ And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. ³⁸ She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. ³⁹ Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." ⁴⁰ Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak." ⁴¹ "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" ⁴³ Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." ⁴⁴ Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." ⁴⁸ Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." ⁴⁹ But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" ⁵⁰ And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Ephesians 2:1–10, 4:31–32 (NRSV)

You were dead through the trespasses and sins ² in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³ All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴ But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵ even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹ not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

³¹ Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³² and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

How hard can it be to forgive? For some, the weight of long-barbored wrongs is so heavy that it crushes the spirit. Forgive one another, as Christ has forgiven us.

Les Misérables is one of the great novels and one of the most popular. Writing at the beginning of the American Civil War, the French author, Victor Hugo, told the epic story of Jean Valjean, hunted by the police for theft after his release from prison, where he served nineteen years for stealing a loaf of bread (five for the theft, fourteen more for numerous escape attempts). The page 4 text box has both a brief synopsis of the story and a bit of the novel's history.

The novel has been adapted for film many times. Our movie for this week is the well-done 1998 version starring Liam Neeson as Valjean and Geoffrey Rush as his nemesis, Inspector Javert.

At its simplest, *Les Misérables* is the story of these two men: Valjean, a criminal in the eyes of the law, and Javert, the police inspector who becomes obsessed with apprehending the lawbreaker.

Victor Hugo

Victor-Marie Hugo was born in Besançon, France, on February 26, 1802. In the 1820s and 1830s, Victor Hugo came into his own as a writer and figurehead of the new Romanticism, a movement that sought to liberate literature from its stultifying classical influences. The great success *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* confirmed Hugo's primacy among the Romantics.

Personal tragedy pursued Hugo relentlessly. His jealous brother Eugène went permanently insane following Victor's wedding to Adèle. His daughter, Léopoldine, together with her unborn child and her devoted husband, died at 19 in a boating accident on the Seine. Hugo never fully recovered from this loss.

Political ups and downs ensued as well, following the shift of Hugo's early royalist sympathies toward liberalism during the late 1820s. He first held political office in 1843, and as he became more engaged in France's social troubles, he was elected to the Constitutional Assembly following the February Revolution of 1848. After Napoléon III's coup d'état in 1851, Hugo's open opposition ended in his exile from France.

Declining at least two offers of amnesty – which would have meant curtailing his opposition to the Empire – Hugo remained in exile in the Channel Islands for 19 years, until the fall of Napoléon III in 1870. Meanwhile, the seclusion of the islands enabled Hugo to write some of his most famous verse as well as *Les Misérables* (1862). When he returned to Paris, the country hailed him as a hero. Hugo then weathered, within a brief period, the siege of Paris, the institutionalization of his daughter Adèle for insanity, and the death of his two sons. Despite this personal anguish, the aging author remained committed to political change. He became an internationally revered figure who helped to preserve and shape the Third Republic and democracy in France. Hugo's death on May 22, 1885, generated intense national mourning; more than two million people joined his funeral procession in Paris from the Arc de Triomphe to the Panthéon, where he was buried.

An abridgment of the introduction to B & N's edition of *Les Misérables*.

A novel as immense as *Les Misérables* (I read the abridged version 20 years ago and it ran to 700 pages or so!) is replete with stories and themes. One of the most revealing is Valjean's encounter with the Bishop of Digne.

A bishop's grace

After Valjean's release from prison he is reduced to living in the streets where he is taken in for the night by the kindly bishop. In the middle of the night, the desperate Valjean grabs some silver and runs away. He is later caught by the police and claims that the bishop gave him the silver.

The police, of course, find the story incredulous and take Valjean to the bishop's home. With Valjean in hand, the police ask the bishop if he gave this homeless man the silver.

To the officer's (and the reader's) shock, the bishop lies and says that, yes, he gave the silver to Valjean. Not only that, the bishop quickly grabs a couple of candlesticks off the table and drops them into the thief's sack, "reminding" Valjean that the bishop had said he could take that silver also!

I can imagine the look on the policemen's faces. How could this be? The bishop is saying that he gave this bum a sack filled with silver?

The bishop then "reminds" Valjean of one more thing. His promise to use the silver to become a better man. Of course, Valjean never made such a promise, any more than the bishop gave him the silver.

But that is the point. The bishop's act is one of pure grace. He not only forgives the theft, but then turns over another generous sum. Does he extract any sort of agreement from Valjean? Has Valjean done anything to earn or to merit such help? No. Hence it is grace, which, by definition, is neither merited nor earned.

I can't help but think of Jesus and the cross. Perhaps that was Hugo's intention, though given his antipathy toward the Catholic Church, it seems doubtful.

Jesus' faithfulness all the way to death, even death on a cross, was an act of grace pure and simple. It is grace poured out on each of us. It is forgiveness and reconciliation that none of us have earned nor that any of us deserve. Jesus' faithfulness was pure grace. As Paul wrote: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).

What does the Bishop ask of Valjean? That he become a better man. The bishop doesn't demand it nor make it a condition of his forgiveness and generosity. He just asks for it, hopes for it, and, I imagine, prays for it.

This too is evocative of Paul, who wrote: "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:31-32). Paul is not speaking of a transaction, just the outworkings of grace.

The Bishop hopes that the grace given Valjean will spur him toward genuine transformation, and it does. Paul hopes the same for those to whom God's grace in Christ has been given. As the film moves on, the change in Valjean is evident; his transformation is concrete and visible to all. Does our own receipt of God's grace bear fruit in our lives?

An inspector's obsession

Javert stands in stark contrast to Valjean. He is a man of the law. The keeping and enforcing of the law, in every jot and tittle, defines him. The law is a good and necessary thing, but Javert turns into an instrument of obsession and oppression. Even when Valjean steps forward and reveals himself so that an innocent man is not punished in his place, Javert cannot find a bit of grace within himself. The truth, of course, is that grace stands in tension with the law. Grace is about forgiveness; the law is about accountability. Javert doesn't attempt to resolve that ambiguity at all. All that matters is the law. Period. Grace plays no part in Javert's life – or so he thinks.

It's pretty hard to think about Javert and not be reminded of many of the Pharisees depicted in the four Gospels. Take today's story from Luke 7 for example. The gathered Pharisees are unable to see the woman as anything other than a "sinner," a law breaker. They can't really see this repentant woman who has come to honor and to love Jesus. They understand something about forgiveness and grace in their heads, but have none of either in their hearts. It is Jesus who gives the woman forgiveness and reconciliation and sends her out to a new life of wholeness and peace.

And Javert? When Valjean saves him from the rebellion's firing squad, Javert simply can't accept it. He seems not only incapable of forgiving, he can't accept forgiveness. He has become so obsessed with the keeping of the law that he cannot live in the face of Valjean's forgiveness and grace. Javert's internal conflict between grace and law becomes so acute that he throws himself into the Seine and drowns.

Grace, and the forgiveness that often springs from it, is the breath of life. God's first creative activity was an act of grace. His love for us springs from grace. His rescue of us through the sacrificial death of his son, Jesus, was an act of pure grace. Grace through and through. May we all gratefully accept the grace of God, and may we extend to others the grace given us.

Synopsis of *Les Miserables*

The following was written by Amy Simpson of *Christianity Today*.

Frenchman Jean Valjean (Liam Neeson) has served 19 years of hard labor as a consequence for stealing bread when he was starving. Now released from prison, he is doomed to a life without respect, meaningful work, or a livable wage. Rather than report to his parole officer, he steals silverware from a bishop who has given him shelter for the night. When he's caught and the generous bishop forgives him (and sends Valjean away with even more silver), he has new hope. Valjean starts a new life and devotes himself to bringing hope and grace to others. Among other deeds, he cares for a dying woman, Fantine (Uma Thurman), who has been forced into prostitution to support herself and her daughter after being fired from Valjean's factory. Before Fantine dies, Valjean promises to care for her daughter, Cosette.

Unfortunately, Valjean can't escape his past. When Inspector Javert (Geoffrey Rush) recognizes Valjean from his days in the quarries, Valjean flees and again starts a new life. He rescues Cosette (Claire Danes) from her cruel caretakers and takes her to Paris. They take refuge in a church, where he raises her as his daughter. Ten years later, outside the church's haven, Valjean finds himself again hunted by Javert. Cosette falls in love with an outspoken revolutionary student, Marius. As the people of Paris call for revolution, Valjean rescues Marius from the firing squad and unites him with Cosette. At the film's conclusion, Javert takes his own life and releases Valjean to live in freedom.

Some history about Hugo's novel

The following is based on the Wikipedia entry:

The first two volumes of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* were published on April 3, 1862, heralded by a massive advertising campaign; the remainder of the novel appeared on 15 May 1862. At the time, Victor Hugo enjoyed a reputation as one of France's foremost poets, and the appearance of the novel was a highly anticipated event. Critical reactions were wide-ranging and often negative; some critics found the subject matter immoral, others complained of its excessive sentimentality, and still others were disquieted by its apparent sympathy with the revolutionaries. The Goncourt brothers expressed their great dissatisfaction, judging the novel artificial and disappointing. Flaubert could find within it "neither truth nor greatness." French critic Charles Baudelaire reviewed the work glowingly in newspapers, but in private castigated it as "tasteless and inept."

The book was a great commercial success. The shortest correspondence in history was between Hugo and his publisher Hurst & Blackett in 1862. It is said Hugo was on vacation when *Les Misérables* (which is over 1200 pages) was published. He telegraphed the single-character message "?" to his publisher, who replied with a single "!". It proved popular not only in France, but across Europe. It has been a popular book ever since it was published, and was a great favorite among the Confederate soldiers of the American Civil War, who occasionally called themselves "Lee's Miserables" (a reference to their deteriorating conditions under General Robert E. Lee). Its popularity continues to this day, and many view it as one of the most important novels ever written.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Rev. Edlen Cowley has developed the following questions as discussion starters for St. Andrew's Fall Fellowship Groups:

Read Luke 7:36-50.

1. Why do you think God forgives us?
2. What makes forgiving someone so difficult?
3. What makes forgiving yourself so difficult?
4. How easily do you say the words, "I am sorry?" Can you admit when you are wrong?
5. What message about forgiveness did you gain from "Les Miserables"?
6. What did Jean Valjean represent to you?
7. What did Javert represent to you?

Read Matthew 6:14.

1. What do you think kept Javert from forgiving Valjean? Do you identify with Javert in anyway? Is there someone in your life you need to forgive? Is there something you need to forgive yourself for?
2. Why do you think Jesus says what he says in Matthew 6:14?
3. What's the first step you can take toward becoming a more forgiving person?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Matthew 6:14-15 & Matthew 18:21-22 Jesus teaches about our duty to forgive without limit.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Genesis 45:5-14 & 50:15-21 Joseph (of the many-colored coat) forgives his enemies.</p>
<p>Wednesday, 1 Samuel 24: 8-12 & 26:21-25 David forgives Saul for trying to kill him.</p>	<p>Thursday, Nehemiah 9 The people of God gather to confess their sins to a forgiving God (v. 17 contains a well-known description of God's forgiveness and love).</p>
<p>Friday, 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 Paul urges the Corinthian church to forgive and call home someone who had done something bad enough to be removed from the church.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

**Scott's 11:00 Sunday class in Festival Hall
the current series:**

The Bible and the Qur'an: Side by Side

How much do you really know about the Qur'an? For most of us, the answer is not much. In this series, we'll be looking at the treatment of important biblical subjects, such as Adam and Jesus, from the perspective of both the Bible and the Qur'an.

This promises to be one of our most interesting and timely series in a while.

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Beginning this week, Monday evening, September 20 (6:45-8:30)
Scott's evening Bible study for the fall Bible Academy

The Book of Daniel

Daniel, one of the most misused books in the Bible, asks the question, "Who's in charge here?" The reader is taken on a journey from despair to hope, traveling through some well-known Sunday School stories and imaginative visions of God's triumph. Join us as we examine the handwriting on the wall (one those famous stories) and meet the Son of Man. This eight-week study will challenge your heart, your intellect, and your imagination.

To register go to www.scottengle.org and click on the Bible Academy registration link or call Kate Huber at 214-291-8021.

Please register. It really helps us to be ready for the first class meeting.

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Also: every Tuesday, a lunchtime brownbag in-depth Bible study with Scott Engle from 11:45 - 1:00, Room 127.

Just drop in when you can. Each week stands alone.

We are studying Paul's letter to the Galatians.

Sermon Notes
