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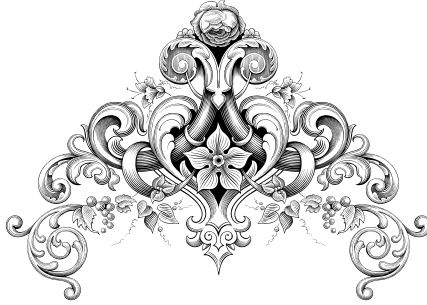
THE GRACE OF

Les Misérables



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1

GRACE WELL RECEIVED: THE STORY OF JEAN VALJEAN

“Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to what is evil but to what is good. I have bought your soul to save it from black thoughts and the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God.”¹

All of the characters in Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* offer us a profound picture of how we understand and interact with the world around us, but none has captured our collective imagination as much as the redeemed criminal Jean Valjean. From stealing a loaf of bread to feed his sister’s family to becoming an unmarried and saintly figure by the end of the story, Valjean represents our

own struggle with not only understanding what is good, but having the courage to *do* the good. The popular musical based on Hugo's story suggests that Valjean's conversion from criminal to saint happens in the blink of an eye, and his commitment to following a holy path becomes an almost instinctual action. The original story, however, suggests that choosing the good is a daily and often difficult choice. Much like a recovering addict, Valjean struggles with dampening his personal demons for the sake of making holy choices. If we are honest, our story is similar. Always choosing the good would be easy if the good were obvious. Jean Valjean's journey helps us recognize how difficult accepting grace can be, and how sharing grace can sometimes be even more difficult.

The Lenten season invites us into this struggle. The forty days of Lent is time set apart for we who are the body of Christ to give up distractions or adopt spiritual practices that prepare us to celebrate Jesus' resurrection well. Lent is the church's gift to itself. It is neither mentioned nor mandated in the Gospels, but we know ourselves well. As we will discover with Valjean, accepting grace can be difficult work. Sometimes we feel that grace is absurd when it is offered to us. Maybe more often than we care to admit, grace seems wasteful when it's offered to those we don't think deserve it. Other times our faults and failures are so distracting that we don't recognize grace when it is offered. This great season prepares our soul to have the humble vision to recognize that the empty tomb means death is no longer the end of our story. Valjean's story is a helpful way to begin the season. Transformation takes time. Even though Jesus was raised after three days, for us the journey takes much longer.

AN OFFERING OF GRACE

I fell in love with the musical *Les Misérables* when I was in high school. It had everything I was looking for: a hero who was transformed from sinner to saint, romance between two star-crossed lovers, war anthems and revolution, a lot of high notes I could practice singing, and maybe most importantly, the celebration of God's grace. I had seen *Godspell*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, but none of these musicals seemed real or honest about faith. They all have their place, but *Les Misérables* offers something different.

Les Misérables is a story that wrestles with the intersection between offering grace and maintaining justice. This story doesn't shy away from the devastation of abject poverty and whether armed resistance against those with power is the most appropriate remedy to changing the world. It's the kind of story that leaves you asking better questions about God, the world, and our role within it, rather than offering a nice and polite moral with a curtain call. I could tell they were offering the story of what it means to follow Christ without being labeled as a "Christian" musical. It's one thing to talk about grace, forgiveness, and our role of being in ministry with the poor, but how does this translate to our neighbors when we aren't sitting in a pew or worship center chair? At least for me, this was the kind of story I desperately needed at that time in my Christian walk. When I was young, Christianity seemed like a set of rules to make sure we were polite and that God liked us. The music we sang was sweet, catchy, and always had a moral. There's nothing necessarily wrong with a sweet and easy-to-remember Bible school song, but the *Les Misérables* musical offered an authenticity that I felt was missing.

Appropriately, this whole story begins with the kindness of a priest, which originates long before we see the criminals singing

in the musical's prologue. Monseigneur Myriel was a parish priest in the early nineteenth century in the town of Digne, France. His kindness and selflessness earned him the nickname M. Bienvenu. He was a champion of the poor, often giving money away as quickly as he acquired it. He is a bit of a Robin Hood of sorts, never letting a bit of larceny get in the way of offering money to the poor and destitute, which immediately sets up the ethical tension of whether the end justifies the means. M. Bienvenu always has the end in mind.

Have you ever been in a situation where there is tension between the means and the end, or doing something that might stretch the rules to the point of breaking, but goodness was the end result? Jesus was known to bend the rules for the glory of God. Early in Mark's Gospel, Jesus and the disciples were picking grain on the Sabbath, which was forbidden according to Exodus 34:21—"You should do your work for six days, but on the seventh day you should rest. Even during plowing or harvesttime you should rest" (CEB). The Pharisees were quick to remind Jesus that what they were doing was not permitted, but Jesus replied:

"Haven't you ever read what David did when he was in need, when he and those with him were hungry? During the time when Abiathar was high priest, David went into God's house and ate the bread of the presence, which only the priests were allowed to eat. He also gave bread to those who were with him." . . . "The Sabbath was created for humans; humans weren't created for the Sabbath."

(Mark 2:25-27 CEB)

Sometimes we forget that we are reading this story thousands of years after the Resurrection, knowing that Jesus was the fully human and fully divine Messiah and therefore Jesus has full authority to re-narrate our understanding of God's Law. At the

time, the Pharisees had a point. From their point of view, breaking the Law was a sign that you did not trust that God would provide. God allowed a double portion of manna from heaven so that the ancient Israelites would not need to gather on the seventh day. The Pharisees might question the disciples as to why they were hungry. Why did they not gather enough the day before, and do they not trust that God will supply their every need? Jesus' teaching here is less about what to do and what not to do on the Sabbath; rather Jesus is teaching the Pharisees that our commitment to loving our neighbor is the center of God's Law. When there seems to be tension between loving our neighbor and a stipulation of the Law, loving our neighbor wins.

Bending or breaking the rules to meet the needs of others is where Jean Valjean enters the story. Valjean is arrested for stealing bread in order to feed his widowed sister's family. Is it wrong to steal bread in order to feed a starving family? Maybe a better question is why are those who have bread unwilling to share it? Maybe this particular bread maker was finding it difficult to make ends meet, and he wasn't in a place to offer bread at no cost? Maybe an even better question is why a widowed mother is starving in a place so steeped in Christianity as France?

Regardless, Valjean is arrested and given a five-year sentence of hard labor. His various attempts at escape lengthened his sentence to nineteen years. This extended time in the cruel French penal system changed this relatively good and moral man into someone who had become hardened, hopeless, and desperate. After his release he searches for lodging, and even though he has money to offer, he is seen as dangerous and a threat. There was no room for him in the inn, so to speak. After being run off by a dog for resting in a dog house, he finds himself at rock bottom. He says to himself, "I am not even a dog."² Even Lazarus didn't scare away the dogs that took to licking his wounds.

He finds himself at the doorstep of M. Bienvenu who, much to Valjean's surprise, welcomes him and offers him supper and a bed for the evening. This welcome Valjean receives reminds me of Jesus' parable about the prodigal son. In essence, the priest puts a ring on his finger, offers him sandals for his feet, and kills the fatted calf for someone seemingly undeserving. Unfortunately, Valjean's reaction to this grace is to steal silver from the priest and make a quick getaway in the middle of the night.

Have you ever offered grace expecting to receive grace in return? I wish I could tell you that grace is always reciprocated, but that wouldn't be the truth. Jesus even reminds us not to offer grace with the expectation of receiving grace in return.

“If you love those who love you, why should you be commended? Even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, why should you be commended? Even sinners do that. If you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, why should you be commended? Even sinners lend to sinners expecting to be paid back in full. Instead, love your enemies, do good, and lend expecting nothing in return. If you do, you will have a great reward. You will be acting the way children of the Most High act, for he is kind to ungrateful and wicked people. Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate.”

(Luke 6:32-36 CEB)

Lent is a time for us to lean into areas of our walk with Christ that need some attention. Learning to offer grace with no expectation of receiving grace in return is certainly something on which we all can focus as we consider Christ's journey to the cross. For Valjean, offering grace is not yet part of his story. He first must dive into the difficult work of receiving grace, and the art of receiving grace is something that follows him for the rest of his remarkable, redemptive story.

A CHANGED LIFE?

Have you ever had someone tell you that you remind them of someone else? “You remind me of my brother,” or “You remind me of my friend growing up.” I’m never quite sure how to respond, though I usually end up saying something unremarkable like, “Oh, he must be a funny guy,” to which they usually respond, “Not really, but he is bald.” Have you ever spent time considering the difference between how we see ourselves and how others see us? Sometimes these pictures can be similar, and other times we are left scratching our heads wondering how someone could see us in a particular way.

After a speaking engagement a few years ago, someone from the audience approached me and said, “You must be a three.” I had no idea what she was talking about, so I answered saying, “If that’s on a scale from one to ten, you’re probably right.” She was talking about Enneagram types, a tool used to understand your personal motivations and aversions. On the way home I began researching Enneagram types (and later attended a workshop) and discovered that I am very much not a three. I was left wondering why someone would see me so differently than I see myself. Was I trying to hide who I really was? When I’m in front of a crowd am I pretending to be someone I’m not? Could it be that she was just a poor judge of character? Whatever the case, are we who we think we are? For those well-versed in the Enneagram, you will recognize that asking these questions reveals that I am a solid seven.

The local police apprehend Valjean for stealing the priest’s silver in the middle of the night, and when M. Bienvenu is invited to identify Valjean as the thief, the priest surprises everyone. He offers Valjean additional silver, claiming that what Valjean had taken was a gift. After Valjean is released, M. Bienvenu tells Valjean that he must use this silver to become an honest man. This act of

kindness is almost too much for Valjean to bear. This is a convicting moment for Valjean. Since his imprisonment he had been incapable of believing that there was good in the world. Not only does the priest reveal that grace exists and can personally be experienced, he offers the challenge and charge to go and do likewise. The message is not to “go and sin no more,” as is often lifted up in moments of grace; rather it is a proactive calling to do good.

Following Christ is more than avoiding sin or evading things that distract us from loving God and loving our neighbor. We miss the gospel when we only live a “thou shall not” life. Of course, resisting temptation and recognizing the power of saying “no” is important, but if this is our only goal, we might find ourselves walking on the other side of the road to protect our own purity rather than joining the good Samaritan to care for the man who fell into the hands of robbers (Luke 10).

To say that this moment in the story is Valjean’s conversion is not altogether accurate. The kindness M. Bienvenu offers is a conviction unlike this convict had ever received. Valjean’s assumption that the world is depraved, without hope of grace, is tried and found to be false. His belief that he is only capable of being a thief is radically turned on its head. His resignation of being “less than a dog” is seemingly excised under the power of this priest’s charge. To say that this is Valjean’s conversion, a “once and for all” kind of moment, is to deny his struggle that we will see later in the story; but we can certainly say that what he considered to be true about the world, his identity, and his self-worth is a conviction that will soon transform the lives of many.

What do you consider to be true about the world? I remember I was in high school when I first started reading Scripture for myself. It was Holy Week, the week before Easter, when I read Jesus’ passion story in the Gospel of Mark in my bedroom before going to bed one night. The high priest, named Caiaphas in other Gospels,

asks Jesus if he is the Messiah. Jesus replies, “I am” (Mark 14:62). This answer seems pretty simple and straightforward. I decided to read the same story from Matthew’s Gospel to see how they might be different. In Matthew, Caiaphas asks Jesus the same question, but Jesus’ answer is different—You say so, but I tell you

“I am” is not the same as “You say so.” I checked Luke and John, and to my astonishment, Jesus’ answers were slightly different in each account (and very different in John’s Gospel). This Jesus that I had been hearing about from my friends and my church was now both foreign and oddly exciting to me. It’s one thing for the Gospels to offer a slightly different picture of what Jesus did and said, but when Jesus’ answer to the same simple question is so different, it left me wondering what else I had been missing. This started me on the path to read almost anything I could get my hands on that had anything to do with Scripture. Ultimately this is part of my story in becoming a pastor. Sharing the complexity, beauty, and nuance of Scripture is an opportunity for which I am thankful every day.

During that time in my life, I experienced a great conviction, but conversion had only just begun. The same is true for Valjean. The grace he receives from M. Bienvenu is a great conviction that challenges his worldly assumptions. The priest had every right to hand Valjean over to the police, but he didn’t. Instead, he offered him a gift and sent him on his way. Valjean’s conviction is powerful, and his conversion is only just beginning.

We sometimes talk about having a “Damascus Road” experience, like the apostle Paul, as if this moment of blinding light, revelation, or new learning causes us to be born again through faith; but Paul was not converted on the road to Damascus. Paul was convicted on the road to Damascus. His assumptions were questioned, his actions called into question, and everything he thought he knew about God seemed to turn upside down. The risen Lord

who appeared before Paul had every opportunity to enact a blind justice against Paul. At the very least, Paul approved of the stoning of Stephen. Christ could have asked for Paul's life in that moment. An eye for an eye, so to speak. But this is not the gospel. Paul was convicted on the road to Damascus, but his conversion began when his enemy, a Christian named Ananias, laid hands upon him and healed him. Valjean has now been convicted, but his conversion has just begun. This radical shift he is experiencing is his understanding that he is no longer a convict running from the law; rather he is convict of grace.

Can you put your finger on a time when your assumptions about the world changed? Maybe it was when you had your first child, and you suddenly realized you were no longer living only for yourself. Maybe you came face to face with someone who had the right to treat you just as poorly as you treated that person, but he or she refrained. Maybe you opened the Bible late one night, and everything you thought you knew about Jesus was turned on its head. Conviction changes our perception of the world around us. We are the same, but our perception is different. Conversion is when we, ourselves, begin to change. We discover a holy dance when we live into the graceful conviction of Christ. Our assumptions are challenged, and we move with the Holy Spirit into a new way of life. Then, quite unexpectedly, the Spirit convicts us again, and points us in yet another direction. God is alive, moving, and dynamic, which means that the dance between conviction and conversion is a beautiful and never-ending adventure with the divine.

DISCIPLINE AND RESPONSIBILITY

One of my favorite Scriptures is the beginning of the Book of Acts (1:6-11). Jesus is ascending, promising the power of the Holy Spirit will be offered the disciples, and these Jesus followers

THIS LENT PONDER THE THEMES OF JUSTICE, POVERTY, GRACE, AND LOVE.

Whether you've read the novel, seen the Broadway musical, heard its soundtrack, or seen the several screen adaptations, you already know the power of *Les Misérables*. In this six-week Lenten study, author and pastor Matt Rawle explores six themes—grace, justice, poverty, revolution, love, and hope—each represented by a character in Hugo's story. Rawle draws parallels between the iconic story and musical and our Christian calling, inspiring us to understand our faith and live it out in the world.

Matt Rawle's passion for musical theater and scripture has led him to create an insightful spiritual exploration of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. Rawle connects the spiritual journeys of the main characters to the Gospels while also sharing from his life as a pastor, parent, student, and actor. This Lenten study would be useful any time of year as it serves as a platform to consider the spiritual aspects of other works of theater and literature.

—**John O'Boyle**, Broadway producer and composer

With characteristic appetite and verve, Matt Rawle sets the great redemption story that is *Les Misérables* alongside the Great Redemption Story itself, bringing insight, wit, and illumination in both directions, in the process stirring heart, mind, and soul.

—**Samuel Wells**, Vicar, St. Martin-in-the-Fields

I dreamed a dream that there would be a writer worth reading on cultural classics—like *Les Misérables*. It's the amazing Matt Rawle who has delved deeply into the themes, sorrows, hopes and delights of *Les Mis*, unearthing the implications for us as Christians who love *Les Mis* and also Jesus, or at least want to. What a gift!

—**James Howell**, Senior Pastor, Myers Park UMC, Charlotte, NC

Also available: 6-session DVD, Leader Guide, and Youth Study Book



Matt Rawle is Lead Pastor at Asbury United Methodist Church in Bossier City, Louisiana. Matt is an international speaker who loves to tell an old story in a new way. He is the author of *The Faith of a Mockingbird*, *The Redemption of Scrooge*, and *The Gift of the Nutcracker*.

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