

I. Intro

A. Last year, a friend told me he was re-reading the first one hundred pages of *Les Miserables*, Victor Hugo's epic novel about "the miserable" – or, depending on your translation from French: The Wretched, The Poor Ones or The Victims. My friend was rereading the first one hundred pages to figure out how to become more like the Bishop who extends grace to Jean Valjean in that powerful early scene.

1. *Les Mis* - which was published in 1862 and quickly recognized as one of the great novels of all time - uses the story of Jean Valjean to unpack the dynamics of law and grace, framing it all against the backdrop of the problems and philosophies of 19th century France.

2. You are likely familiar with story from the musical or one of the many movies that has been based on it.

B. *Les Mis* is my favorite novel. The first time I finished it, I cried. And at the time, I didn't cry about much. I am a little softer in my old age. I would be less surprised to be so powerfully moved by a book now. At the time, it was a bit shocking. But the power of grace – our inability to grasp it and our hesitancy to offer it – are worth crying over.

1. I have watched every version of the movie I have been able to find. Sheri and I have seen the musical live several times. I've even watched the PBS sound track many more.

2. By the way, if all you know is the musical, you are missing about one-third of the story. You've got the backdrop on Jean Valjean and Fantine but not on Marius.

C. All of that aside, in the first part of the story Jean Valjean, who has served 19 years in prison because he stole some bread so his sister could feed her starving baby, cannot find work. A Roman Catholic priest – actually a bishop, Monseigneur Bienvenu – takes him in. In the middle of the night, Valjean steals from him. He is quickly caught, but when the police bring him back to the priest, the priest tell the police that he had given Valjean the silver and that he should be set free. This gracious act by the priest is then a backdrop of all that will follow.

D. I want you to watch a 90 second clip of [this scene](#).

E. It is very powerful. I keep looking for a painting of the candelabra because to me it screams grace.

F. According to Google, it would take the average reader 30 hours and six minutes to read the novel. You could do worse than invest that time in 2023.

G. As noted, I am rereading the first one hundred pages with my friend's question in mind. How do I become more like the Bishop? And I have been stunned by what I did not see in my previous readings of book.

H. I did not realize that this priest is initially described as someone whose “early life was wholly devoted to worldly matters and affairs of gallantry.” Or the ways he is shaped over the course of the first 100 pages. But in going back and re-reading it with that in mind, I am seeing a lot I missed.

I. What are you missing? What are you not seeing about what is going on... around you and in your own heart?

J. When we reread an epic story – doing so with a question in mind - we see things we previously missed and these often make the story much more powerful. That is nowhere truer than with the Bible.

II. And to that end, today we begin a series from the Gospel of John on the last week of Christ’s life. The next 19 weeks will carry us through Easter.

A. There are four accounts of Jesus’ life at the beginning of the New Testament.¹ We call them Gospels, which literarily means good news. They are written by four different evangelists - that is, a person who shares the good news. Each being written with the goal of persuading their readers that Jesus is God and that they should trust him.

1. Luke – who writes his account with Gentiles in mind - addresses his Gospel to “the most excellent Theophilus” (who we take to be a Greek official). He goes on to state that he had decided “to write an orderly account for you, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.” We are not sure if Theophilus had come to faith yet or not, but it is clear Luke’s goal is to see him trust Christ and then grow as a disciple.

2. Near the end of John’s gospel – which he writes for the Greeks.

a) He writes much later than the others and he has Greek philosophers in mind.

b) Matthew is writing for Jews – so he opens with a genealogy that ties the New Testament into the Old. Mark writes a simple account, apparently with Romans in mind. Luke writes for Gentiles. John for the Greeks.

3. Towards the end of John’s Gospel, he states that what he has written has been written so that, “you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

B. John’s Gospel breaks pretty neatly into two parts.

1. Chapters 1-12, which some refer to as the Book of Signs, and chapters 13-21, which is sometimes referred to as the Book of Glory.

2. About one third of the Synoptic Gospels are devoted to the last week of Christ’s life. John gives over one half of his Gospel to the final week and that is where we are going to focus.

C. In the first half of John - John 1-12, the Book of Signs – you see the ways John wants to make it clear that Jesus is God. We have:

1. The epic opening – in which Jesus is called the logos who is equal to God the Father and identified as the Creator.
2. There is a bit about Christ's life early on.
3. But then most of the first half of the book is tracing his public ministry, which spends a lot of time on his identity. One of the main things Jesus spoke about was himself. (It is not all that he taught about, but it was a big theme).
 - a) This unfolds with the titles he is given: the Word, the Son of God, Light of the World, Lamb of God, Messiah, Savior
 - b) Via his powerful teaching
 - c) Via a series of miracles. The way he demonstrates his power over sickness, evil, death, nature
4. So, if you are paying attention, by the time you get to John 13, you are aware that Jesus is God.

D. Next week we begin John 13, which will carry us through Easter. Today we are in John 12 to get things set up.

E. We're going to move fairly quickly through John 13-21.

1. It took five years to get through the 24 chapters of Luke. We are going to cover nine chapters of John in 19 weeks.

2. As an aside, during this series I will be doing the morning devotions – which you can sign up **for ??? – on Jesus**, with many of them from the first half of John.

F. And the key question we'll be exploring in this study – as we work our way through John 13-21 – is what do we do to latch on to this abundant life?

1. In John 10:10, Jesus says, "I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly, to the full." The question we are asking is: What is this life? What does it look like to live well. To follow faithfully? To be who God is calling us to be? How do I do this?

III. The passage that was read is set shortly after Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time. He paraded in with people calling him the king of Israel. We call this the Triumphal entry. We normally read this passage on Palm Sunday.

A. Jesus is the man of the hour. There are a lot of stories about him, he is winning all his debates with the Pharisees; he is healing people and he has just raised Lazarus from the dead.

B. If you track Jesus's polling numbers, they would ebb and flow.

1. He would heal people or feed people or make the Pharisees look like idiots and his numbers would spike. And then he'd say, "if you want to follow me, you need to die to self, serve others, love your enemies and give your money to the needy" and people would say, "Uh, I'll be moving on now."

2. This is the moment in his ministry when he has the largest following.

IV. Let's walk through it. John 12:20-26.

A. **V20: Now there were some Greeks among those who went up² to worship at the festival.**

1. The fact that there are some Greeks among them is a bit surprising. The Passover was a Jewish holiday / holy day. You would not expect Greeks to be there.³ No doubt John mentions them here because he is writing to persuade Greeks to trust Christ – and to that end he wants to show that Christ's popularity had spread beyond the Jews.

B. **V21: They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee,**

1. Philip is an apostle. He is from the Galilee – which is North of Jerusalem and a much nicer place to live.

2. If you ever go on a Holy Land trip – and I recommend it if you can - among the things you learn is that Jerusalem is not necessarily the place you'd pick to live. It's hot and not very green. Those who can, live in the north (in Caesarea or Tel Aviv – those who can live on the Mediterranean, not in Jerusalem).

3. This week I was listening to an interview with Sebastian Montifiore, who wrote the History of Jerusalem – and one of the points that he makes is that in many ways, it's a surprising place for us to be fighting over, because, it's not a place you'd naturally choose to live. For starters, it's not near much water.

C. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee with a request. **“Sir,” they said, “we would like to see Jesus.”**

1. And.... we're off. Everything is about to change. “We want to see Jesus.”

a) They likely had no idea what they were asking. Jesus is the trending story. Some of his Tweets and blog posts have gone viral.⁴ They want a backstage pass. They'd like to ask him a few questions. It's an obvious request. But, Jesus doesn't leave you neutral. If you actually meet Jesus, you do not stay on the same path.

b) Hard to know what the Greeks, or what Philipp and Andrew thought was going to happen, but it probably wasn't what they got – which was this excurses on serving and death, with the added twist that we are not simply to be spectators in this story, but also participants. That, if we really want to see Jesus then we must learn to die. That we are going to need to die to those areas that blind us: fear; the need to be right or to be in control; anger and resentment; attachment to power, the ways in which we separate ourselves from one another; our obsessions our emotional agendas.

c) This work of dying is difficult and painful. It shakes us to the core.

2. There is a lot going on in Holy Week – we are going to watch it unfold.

D. **Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus. Jesus replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”**

1. Jesus has been saying – over and over - that his hour had not yet come. But here he says that it has! The time is now!
 2. The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Son of Man – which is how Jesus most often refers to himself - is a big term. It sounds more humble than claiming to be the Son of God, but it's not. When you look up Daniel 7:13 – which is where it comes from – you realize it's as big of claim as can be made.
 3. Daniel 7 is a vision which reads:
 - a) **“... with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him.**
 - b) **And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.**
 4. In other words, the Son of Man is the one who will be over everyone and everything everywhere forever. This is not a modest claim.
 5. When Jesus uses this term, the religious leaders have fits.
- E. So, some people come to Philip to get to Jesus, and when Jesus hears about it, he says, “it's go time.” “It is time for me – The One who has been promised. The Messiah. The Holy One. The Creator. It is time for me – the one who will eventually be exalted over everyone, everywhere forever – it is time for me - to be glorified.”
1. Which is an interesting word for him to use, given that He is about to be tortured and killed.
- F. **V24: Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.**
- G. Can you imagine being there? I mean, seriously, who talks like this?
1. This verse, by the way, serves as the epigraph for *The Brothers Karamazov*. It is the way Dostoyevsky frames his master book. **“... unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”**
 2. In other words, *The Brothers K* – which is another of the greatest novels of all time – is an investigation into whether or not this verse is true.
 3. Don't miss what's going on here: Dostoyevsky is unpacking the idea that suffering and sacrifice are necessary prerequisites to a full, abundant life. He is wrestling with the idea that suffering – that the hardships you are facing – can have a good purpose.
 4. I am not claiming that all of the suffering is good – that cancer is good or war is good or your divorce is good.
 5. The idea that suffering and sacrifice are ways forward is a weighty claim. In the Brothers K, Dostoyevsky goes right at it.

H. And so does Jesus: **V25: Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.** ²⁶ **Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.**

V. This statement – this weighty claim that is directed at us and which comes where it does – as Jesus prepares to suffer – needs our attention. Is it true? Do you believe it?

A. In the first twelve chapters of John, it is made clear that Jesus is God. He is the Creator. He is King. He is Lord. He is the I AM. He is the Son of Man. He performs miracles, heals the sick, teaches with authority and boldly claims to be God.

B. As we head into the second half of the book, we are now going to see that the One who is God is going to suffer and die on behalf of others.

1. This idea of dying as a profound and noble deed should not surprise you.

a) The death of Christ is pretty hard to have ignored.

b) And we see the imitation of his sacrificial death in lots of popular stories – Frodo and Gandolf in *The Lord of the Rings* - Frodo or Gandalf, Aslan in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* , Harry Potter, etc.

C. What I want to be sure you see is that He calls on us to follow His lead. He calls on us to join him in his radical, self-sacrificing service.

D. And as crazy as that is, he goes on step further – he says this is the way to the life you want. The way up is down. The goal is to serve not to be served.

E. If you are not a bit unsettled, you are not paying attention.

1. There are some really crazy ideas out there right now. In so many ways we are being asked to defy common sense. But Jesus's call to die to self plays as one of the craziest.

VI. Now, I want to be clear. There are ways in which Jesus is all-together unique. There are things He does that – because He did them – do not have to be done again. Jesus is not just an example, he is Lord. God incarnate. His death was sufficient. No one needs to do that again.

A. But, he is inviting us to follow him. More than that, he is calling us to do that. V26 reads: **Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be.**

B. As we will see in the weeks ahead, he heads down a path that includes suffering.

C. Not just suffering. And not Stoicism.

1. Christianity is not all self-denial. It's not just figuring out how to beat the dopamine cycle or how to **do hard things. We have life through Jesus' death. What we do in response is always secondary.**

D.

E.

F. Many people believe that following Jesus is a path towards an easy life.

1. You can only think that if you have not read much of the book.

2. Some say that Jesus is God but then suggest his plans are bad. That they know better.

G. I want to assure you – the path Jesus leads us down is the path to eternal life. It is the path towards peace and joy, but that may end up looking different than you think.

VII. In the weeks ahead, as we follow Jesus through the last week of his life – we are going to be asking: what does this mean for how I should live?

A. What does this say about what the good life looks like? What does this say about:

1. What I should be after? What will complete me? What will make me happy? What it looks like to win?

2. These are the questions being framed for us today.

VIII. As we turn the corner and head towards communion, let me pause to note that one of the applications of identifying with Jesus is getting baptized.

A. One of the applications of this idea that Jesus – the King – is going to die, is baptism. And our being baptized is our symbolic participation with Christ in his death and resurrection.

B. And we are going to have an incredible multi-church baptism service coming up March 19. This is an opportunity to follow Jesus.

C. If you have not yet been baptized, it's time to sign up, which you can do by ????

IX. We will close with communion. This comes out of the participation in Jesus death

¹ In *Surprised by Hope* (HarperOne, 2008), NT Wright notes that the four Gospels are like four different portraits of the same person painted by four different painters. You can tell a Rembrandt from a Holbein and yet you can also tell that they are paintings of the same person.

² They go “up” to it because Jerusalem is at the top of Mount Zion.

³ They are apparently God-fearers, such as we see in Acts ????

⁴ At the height of Israel as a nation, people from around the world would travel to Jerusalem to ask King Solomon questions. This passage suggests that something of the same thing is now happening to Jesus.