

Christmas Perspective
It's a "Wonderful" Life
December 18, 2016

Songs:

Joy to the World

Go Tell It on a Mountain

Feature: God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen

>> VIDEO 1: GEORGE GETS ANGRY

INTRODUCTION

How many of you have seen the movie, "It's a Wonderful Life"? It's a timeless classic and one I would encourage you to watch this Christmas.

This time of year, my son Joel makes it his personal goal to watch all of the Christmas classics in the days leading up to Christmas. So needless to say, I've watched this movie numerous times with him.

In the scene we just watched, George Bailey is struggling with an unexpected calamity that has

turned his life upside down. He's a mess and he is thinking some pretty dark thoughts as he contemplates his predicament. Ever been there? Or felt helpless watching someone you love be there? One thing I realized as I re-watched this movie this week is that there is a timelessness to George Bailey's struggle and that's simply this: Life is full of unexpected trouble. And when trouble strikes, we wrestle with all sorts of questions like: Why is life so hard sometimes? Why is it that no matter how hard we try, our destinies are shaped by forces beyond our control? Why is life so hard for some people but not for all people? At times, our trials can feel very personal because life goes on and the world keeps spinning round and round in spite of the fact that some of us are drowning. How do we handle the unpredictable twists of misfortune that sometimes plunge us or those we love into hopelessness and

despair?

These are just some of the questions that we wrestle with when trouble comes knocking at our door. So the question before us today is this: what can a 70-year-old Christmas movie about a small town banker teach us about enduring trials? Well that's what we are here to discover in the next half hour.

REVIEW

As many of you know, we've been working through a series of messages called "Christmas Perspective" where we are taking a look at some helpful topics for this holiday season. Last week in his message titled, "Fa-la-la-la Family", Rick gave us some practical wisdom on how to deal with the unrealistic expectations we often face with friends and family this time of year. Don't forget to check out last week's message on our

church website or on our church app.

This week, we are going to conclude this series by looking at some principles gleaned from the movie,

It's a Wonderful Life

Chicago movie critic, Roger Ebert, once said that there are some movies you only watch once. But there are others that you can watch over and over again because they are the classics. "It's a Wonderful Life" is such a movie. No matter how many times you've seen it, you never get tired of watching it, or fail to be inspired by it. The movie works like a strong and fundamental fable, sort of a "Christmas Carol" in reverse: Instead of a mean old man being shown scenes of happiness, we have a local hero who plunges into despair. That

hero is a man named George Bailey and we can learn a lot about the struggles he faced in his hometown of Bedford Falls. As you saw in the clip we viewed just a few minutes ago, it's Christmas Eve, 1945, and George Bailey has come to the end of his rope. But why? Why is George so despondent? Why is he about to give up on life? To answer these questions, we have to press rewind and go back in time to a moment which reveals the tensions that will eventually break him.

DREAMING BIG

Let's go back to his early 20s, where George is still living at home with his parents and his younger brother, Harry. His father - founder of the Bailey Brothers Building and Loan - couldn't afford to send him to college, so George has worked for him since his graduation from High

School. But, now, he's finally saved up enough money for college and it's the night before his long-awaited "escape from Bedford Falls" - a trip to Europe before heading off to the university.

As we watch this clip, listen carefully to both men and their dreams and visions. Notice what's different about them and yet what is the same.

>>VIDEO 2 (2.5) BIG DREAMS

This one scene represents the tension which George will live with the next 10 years of his life. He's a big dreamer of things that are "out there" somewhere. Yet, he understands and values the dreams of his father which are centered in Bedford Falls. As you can tell from this dialogue, he loves his dad deeply as well as the people of Bedford Falls. Eventually, the tension caused by

these competing factors conspire to send him to a breaking point.

What happens in the first two thirds of the movie following this scene is nothing less than the systematic crushing of all of George's hope and dreams. Later that same night, his father has a stroke and dies and George sacrifices the trip to Europe in order to straighten out the Building & Loan - the only business in Bedford Falls not run by Mr. Potter, a malicious, crooked, Scrooge-like businessman, known as “the richest and meanest man in the county.”

George is forced to postpone college. He gives his college money to his younger brother, Harry, who goes to school, gets married, but doesn't take over the business upon graduation like he had promised to do. George reluctantly stumbles into marriage

with Mary, his high school sweetheart and eventually starts a family, all of which further ties him to Bedford Falls. Even his honeymoon, his last chance to see the world, is canceled because he has to use the \$2,000 he had saved for his honeymoon to avoid a run on the Building & Loan and protect it from bankruptcy.

CATASTROPHE STRIKES

Let's fast forward through the movie to Christmas Eve, 1945. George and Mary have established a family and a strong reputation in the eyes of the people of Bedford Falls. But something happens the night before Christmas that pushes him to the brink of despair. In fact, George's life will never be the same after this. Let's watch.

>>VIDEO 3 (1.9) UNCLE BILLY LOSES MONEY

His absent-minded partner, Uncle Billy, misplaced \$8,000 of the Building & Loan's money and the money accidentally falls into the hands of the evil Mr. Potter. As it turns out, this is also the day that the bank examiner is checking the Building & Loan's books. Unable to make the books balance, George faces not only bankruptcy, but public humiliation and criminal liability that could land him in jail.

And that's what finally breaks George. In absolute desperation he runs out on his family and he even turns to his mortal enemy for help.

>>VIDEO 4 (2.3) SHOW ME THE WAY

At the lowest point of his life, George concludes that Potter is right. He's worth more dead than alive. But, just as he is ready to take his life ...

something incredible happens. God sends an answer to his prayer in the form of a ...well let's watch and find out.

>>VIDEO 5 (1.1) ANSWERED PRAYERS LESSONS LEARNED

In the final third of the movie, Angel Second Class Clarence Oddbody - the guy who jumps in the water knowing George would try to save him - leads George to discover just how wonderful his life really is. In that process, George learns four important lessons that I think are valuable for all of us as well.

Lesson 1: EVERY PERSON MAKES AN IMPACT.

Or, as one reviewer puts it: "It's a Wonderful Life

has earned its legion of followers because it effectively touches upon one basic truth of life that we all would like to believe -- that each of us, no matter how apparently insignificant, has the power to make a difference, and that the measure of our humanity has nothing to do with fame or money, but with how we live our life on a day-to-day basis. This movie asks and answers a question that all of us think of at one time or another: ‘What would this world be like if I had never been born?’”

This is what happens to George. Clarence lets him see what the world would be like if he had never been born. For example, if George had not saved his brother Harry from drowning as a child, Harry would never have been a war hero, never would have earned the Congressional Medal of Honor, never would have saved a transport ship full

of soldiers from certain death at sea, altering untold lives.

Clarence goes on to show George how worse off the townsfolk would have been without him.

Bedford Falls would have become Pottersville - a seedy, dark underworld of strip clubs, neon lights, and prostitutes. Mr. Gower, the pharmacist who George worked for as a boy, would have accidentally poisoned a child and become a homeless drunk. Mary, his wife, would have been a lonely spinster. Uncle Billy would have lost the Building & Loan and ended up in an insane asylum. In this next clip, pay close attention to what Clarence says to George at the very end.

>>VIDEO 6 (1.6) YOU HAD A WONDERFUL LIFE

The truth is that every person's life does touch so

many other lives. The question is ... do we touch for better or for worse?

I think a lot of us really want it be for the better. So, we work hard to do what is right, we try to put others or those we love first. But eventually the same thing can happen to us that happened to George. It doesn't work or we fail. And then we start to wonder, "What's the use?"

Discouragement is one way we can be kept from having the impact that God intends for us to have. That's why the Bible says:

***So don't get tired of doing what is good.
Don't get discouraged and give up, for we
will reap a harvest of blessing at the
appropriate time. Galatians 6:9 [NLT]***

Clarence showed George that his "doing what is

good” really was producing a harvest of blessing. He really had made a difference. The same thing is true for you and me. Here is something to think about: if God were to send a Clarence to you, what would he show you about the impact of your life?

Lesson 2. DON'T TAKE LIFE FOR GRANTED.

Earlier, we looked at the differences and similarities between George’s vision and that of his father. Did you catch it? The similarity is that both men dreamed of having an impact. Both men wanted their lives to count. The difference was that George thought he had to go somewhere else in order to accomplish that. He took for granted that he could accomplish (and in fact, was accomplishing) his vision right where he was.

I like the way one reviewer put it: “The message [of this movie] at the end is that some of the best things in life are the ones we never dream about” - the opportunities and relationships we have right under our noses. I have experienced this very thing myself.

I remember my first job after graduating from WSU. I was working third shift as a production supervisor at Hallmark Cards in the manufacturing plant in Crown Center. To be honest, I hated the fact that my first job out of college landed me on the graveyard shift working with people who didn't like me or the jobs they were assigned to do. They were only on third shift because it paid well. It was a very demanding job physically because of the night shift and emotionally because the way I was treated by the

employees. Needless to say, there wasn't much joy in the counter packaging department where I worked. I got so disillusioned with the job after I was there for 1.5 years, that I went to a headhunter to find a way out. He told me I was crazy to leave Hallmark at that time and told me to stay where I was until a job came available within the company to get me off third shift. I didn't like what he told me. But what happened in the next 1.5 years on third shift was nothing short of a miracle and proved the head hunter was right. During that next 1.5 years, I was able to share the gospel with two other managers and one of my employees and all three accepted Jesus and became believers. If I would have left 2rd shift when I wanted to, none of that would have ever happened.

This is why the Bible tells each of us ...

So be careful how you live, not as fools but as those who are wise. Make the most of every opportunity for doing good in these evil days. Ephesians 5:15-16 [NLT]

Questions: Are you making the most out of every day? Are you trusting that the life you've been given, isn't something to be taken for granted, regardless of your current circumstances? That God has a plan he is working out despite what you can see?

Lesson #3: We are not alone in our suffering.

This movie seems to address the despair and hopelessness many of us feel at Christmas time. We've "lost something big"...job, family member

to death, our health, etc. But Clarence represents God's presence. He is always there even in our suffering. And God helps us find hope, even in our suffering, and reveals to us that life is worth living, even when it appears it's not. But the question is: How does God help us find hope? I think He does it three ways:

One of the most invisible ways is through the ministry of angels. Look at what the book of Hebrews says:

Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?

Hebrews 1:14

Yes, I know what some of you are thinking...angels? Yes, angels. God has used angels to carry out his will for mankind since the

beginning of time. They may not look like Clarence in the movie, but angels are real and they help us in our distress and provide encouragement even when we need it the most. For example, in the book of Acts we read how the Apostle Paul received encouragement by a heavenly messenger:

For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.’
Acts. 27:23,24 ESV

While, angels may not make themselves visible to us like the Apostle Paul experienced, but it’s clear from the bible that they work behind the scenes for our benefit. But God’s presence and

encouragement isn't just felt through the ministry of angels, he also uses the Holy Spirit who lives inside every Christian.

In Acts 9, we read,

“Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.”
Acts 9:31 ESV

What does it mean to be encouraged by the Holy Spirit? The word translated “encouraged” in this verse is the Greek word “paraklesis.” It can be translated as “exhortation, comfort or encouragement.” It literally means “to be called to one’s side,” and so it is the picture of someone

coming alongside you to give you help, comfort, encouragement and strength. That's what the Holy Spirit does. He "comes alongside us" when we are in distress. Oftentimes the Holy Spirit will bring to mind an uplifting verse, or a helpful conversation, or a comforting picture or a song or a simple reminder that God loves you! And since he knows exactly what that "help" needs to look like - he is the greatest of all comfort. And that's why Jesus called the Holy Spirit the "Comforter", because the Spirit serves as God's constant presence in our lives.

So we can know that we are never alone in our suffering because of the ministry of angels and the indwelling Holy Spirit who comforts us in our affliction. But there's a third means of encouragement that God provides us and we've all experienced it at some point in our lives. Who

are God's agents to carry out this third ministry of encouragement? Faithful friends. Yes, faithful friends and even complete strangers when "faithful" friends aren't so faithful. Which lead us to our fourth and final lesson of this movie.

Lesson #4: No man (or woman) is a failure who has (faithful) friends.

In the final scene of the movie, George opens a book that he received from Clarence. Inside was the message, "No man is a failure who was friends". This was one of the lessons George learned over the course of the movie. You see, George Bailey is the richest man in town - richer than Old Man Potter - because he had friends. But not just any friends mind you, but FAITHFUL friends who are still there when the money is not... Friends who didn't abandon him in his time

of need.

The Old Testament puts it this way:

One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. Proverbs 18:24 (NIV)

Two people can accomplish more than twice as much as one; they get a better return for their labor. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But people who are alone when they fall are in real trouble. Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 [NLT]

George thought he was alone, but the reality was

that he was not. He had made so many investments in people that they had become his friends. In spite of the fact that his business failed, he himself was a success because of his relationships. I'm curious - is that true of you and me?

Someone has said that at the end of life very few of us will wish that we had spent more time on the job. For most of us, the value of our life will be measured primarily by who we really loved and who really loved us. I like the example of what a "faithful friend" looks like from Pastor Chuck Swindoll:

The late great Joe Bayly and his wife, Mary Lou, lost three of their children. They lost one son following surgery when he was only eighteen days old. They also lost the second boy at age five

because of leukemia. They then lost a third son at eighteen years after a sledding accident, because of complications related to his hemophilia.

Joe writes in a wonderful book, “The Last Thing We Talk About”:

I was sitting, torn by grief. Someone came and talked to me of God's dealings, of why it happened, of hope beyond the grave. He talked constantly; he said things I knew were true. I was unmoved, except I wished he'd go away. He finally did. Another came and sat beside me. He didn't talk. He didn't ask leading questions. He just sat beside me for an hour and more, listened when I said something, answered briefly, prayed simply, left.

I was moved. I was comforted. I hated to see him go. You have done it right when those in agony hate to see you go.

Oftentimes we're mere onlookers when other

people are in pain. We haven't experience their loss. We can't even imagine how hard it must be. But a true friend who really loves moves into that pain of others and is willing to become part of God's ministry of encouragement. Our presence and our tears say much more than our words. Words have a hollow ring in a crucible.

The truth is, when hard times come, it is not merely angels, or the Holy Spirit who help us. It's also our family and friends that get us through. Maybe we can all learn a lesson here; perhaps we should all take more time to step off the "hamster wheel" of our fast paced lives, and spend a little more time cultivating and encouraging family and friends. In the end, it's our faithful friends who will stick with us in our time of trial, just as it was George Bailey's friends who came through for him. Let's watch

>>VIDEO 7 (1.4) THE RICHEST MAN IN TOWN

Did you hear what Uncle Billy said as he was telling George about what was happening? He said excitedly, “George people are scattered all over town collecting money. They didn’t ask any questions. They just said, ‘George is in trouble’, and people said, ‘Count me in’. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

That’s what Faithful friends are like. They don’t ask questions, they just go to work to help in any way they can. If you need money, they are there, if you need someone to sit quietly beside you in your grief. They are there. They are closer than a brother or sister when trouble strikes.

Conclusion:

In summary, there's a lot we can learn from this timeless classic. We can learn that our lives have impact and purpose even when we can't always see it. We can learn that we can't take our everyday lives for granted. It's often those everyday opportunities and relationships we have right under our noses that will make the most difference in the long run. We can learn that God is faithful in the hard times and his presence is with us always, through the ministry of angels or the presence of through the Holy Spirit. And finally, we learn that one of our greatest blessings are those "faithful friends" who are there for us in our times of need.

Both Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed said that of all the movies they ever made, "It's a Wonderful Life" was their favorite. Whether you agree with

their assessment or not, one thing we can say is that the timeless principles that are illustrated in this movie help us to understand that no matter what our circumstances are, God still has a plan for us to “experience life” even in the midst of despair.

Let’s pray.

Closing comments: Give us your spare pocket change to help Adventureland raise money for our strategic partner, Something To Eat.