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Les Misérables

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As an aid to reflection and prayer, the following companion explores some of the most important themes raised by *Les Misérables*. It can be used for personal study, post-movie family debates or larger discussion groups. Its aim is to help relate the moving story of Jean Valjean to our own personal stories as we endeavor to live more authentic Christian lives.

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INTRODUCTION

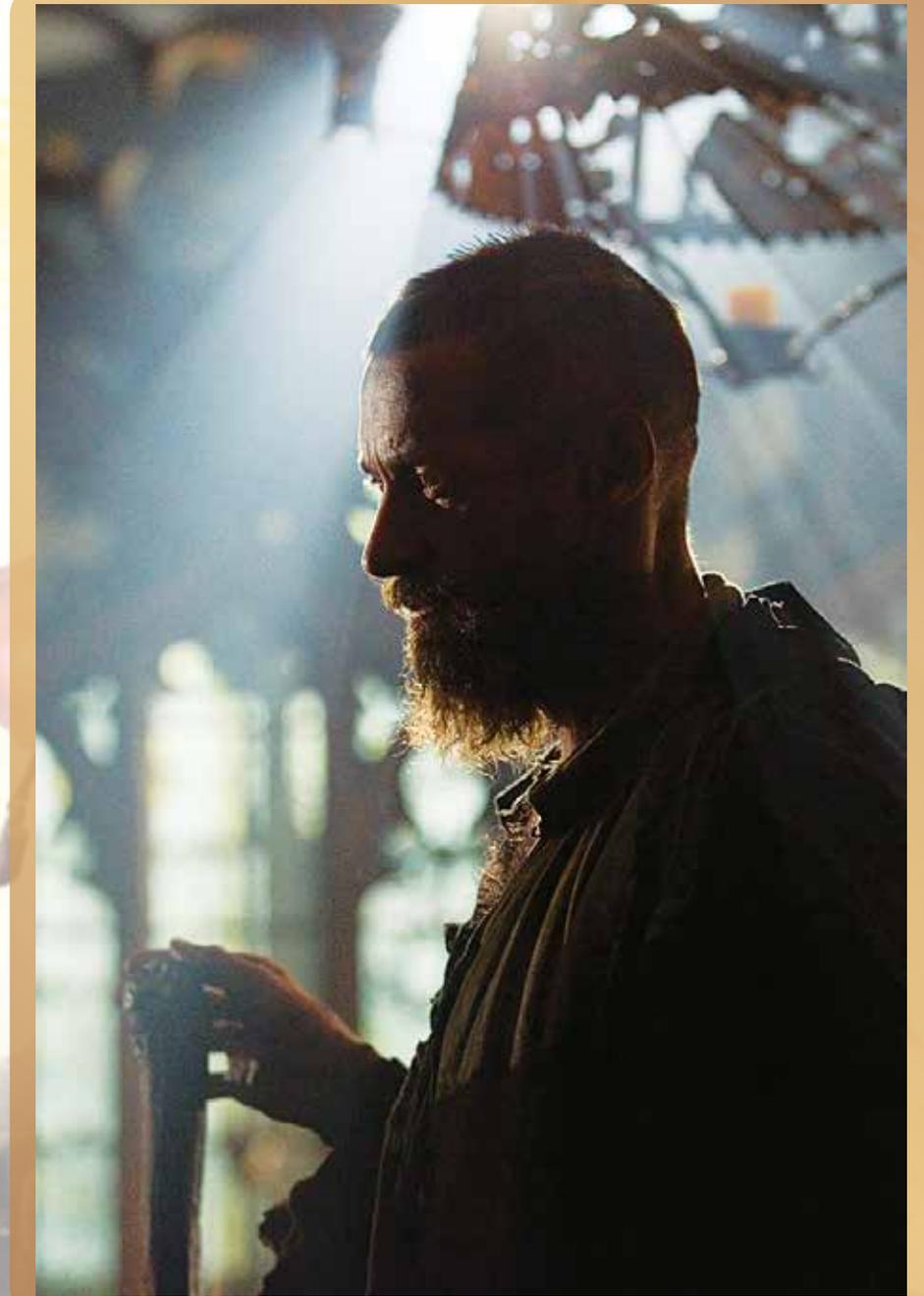
Les Misérables

Les Misérables is a film about truth, devotion, commitment and the transcendent power of faith. The compelling story of redemptive suffering and sacrificial love enables viewers to experience how life would unfold without the constraints of ego, self-interest and bitterness. A dramatic illustration of how human beings can change for the better and how good ends can never justify evil means; *Les Misérables* is a testament to the power and potential of man's heart.

Les Misérables tells the story of Jean Valjean's transformation from a bitter, vengeful man into a man whose soul is forgiven by the redeeming grace of Christ through an act of love. Again and again, Jean Valjean must face and meet challenges to his will – including jeopardizing his own life in sacrificial love for the wretched Fantine, his adopted daughter Cosette and Marius, the man she loves. Furthermore, he must show mercy even to his relentless and merciless pursuer, Javert. Throughout the story, the grace of a loving God leads, guides and protects Jean Valjean, giving him light to know what to do next and the courage and strength to do the right thing at great risk and cost to himself. It is the story of the interplay between justice and mercy, cruelty and love, grace and law. And it is all set against a backdrop of upheaval in post-Revolutionary France that looks back to the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man in the Bible and forward to our world of growing disparity between rich and poor. It is a tale that shows the mercy of God is as necessary to us as it was for Jean Valjean; a story about how anybody, no matter how hard life has been to them, can have the hope of becoming virtuous.

About this Companion Guide

As an aid to reflection and prayer, the following companion explores some of the most important themes raised by *Les Misérables*. It can be used for personal study, post-movie family debates or larger discussion groups. Its aim is to help relate the moving story of Jean Valjean to our own personal stories as we endeavor to live more authentic Christian lives.



REDEMPTION

Les Misérables is, above all, a tale of redemption. Jean Valjean is a man born into a hard and merciless world. He is owned in body – a slave for 19 years, for the “crime” of stealing a loaf of bread. He lives in a world that has taught him to “look down,” not up, and to see nothing but the grave he is standing in. But he is also owned in soul by that same world. His body is ultimately freed of the cruelty of prison, but he carries with him the bitter, hard hatred of a man who cannot forgive and who loves no one.

For a time, he lives the life of an animal until one day a saintly bishop takes him in and offers him food, shelter and, above all, love. Jean Valjean repays the bishop’s kindness by stealing his silverware. Shortly after he is caught and brought back to the bishop. To his astonishment, the bishop gives him all that he stole and, in the spirit of Jesus who said, “If anyone would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well” (Matthew 5:40), the bishop gives him his silver candlesticks as well. In doing this the bishop acts as a channel of the grace of Jesus, who bought his soul and gave it to God. This provokes a crisis in Jean Valjean’s soul, facing him with the choice to accept the grace and love he has received, or to remain in his prison of hate and unable to forgive. He chooses to receive that grace and live life as a new man.

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:**

Les Misérables is about the power of God to seek and save what has been lost. In many ways, Jean Valjean resembles Jesus Christ. Like Christ he suffers unjustly. Like Christ his sufferings have worked to perfect him (Hebrews 2:10), and like Christ who demonstrated his strength of spirit by lifting the wood of the cross, Jean Valjean demonstrates his strength of spirit when he lifts the wood of the broken mast (masts are also cross-shaped).

Have you ever had experiences which have made you stronger and prepared you for something good you would do later? Have you ever felt as though you were sharing the cross of Christ? What happened? How did you use the strength you gained in your suffering?

As the film opens, Jean Valjean’s experiences have left him hard and bitter. He hates the world that has treated him hatefully and feels no connection to anyone. When greeted by the hospitality of a kind bishop as his honored guest, he repays the bishop’s kindness with theft. But just when he expects cruel judgment, he receives the mercy and love of Christ and his soul is redeemed and given to God. Have you ever had an experience of “amazing grace” in which you were helped in ways you could never deserve or repay? Have you or anybody you know ever felt full of anger and then been given the grace to choose to forgive and start a new life? What was that like?

The bishop who welcomes Jean Valjean into his home treats him as an honored guest. In doing this, he is acting in obedience to Jesus’ command: “When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just” (Luke 14:12-14). Can you think of a time you have come to God in poverty (of wallet, or spirit, or virtue) and asked him to supply what you could not? What happened? Can you think of a time when you or somebody you knew had compassion on somebody who could not repay? What happened?

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES TO PONDER:

The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10).

See also: Luke 10:25-37; 2 Corinthians 8:9



MERCY TRIUMPHS OVER JUDGMENT



Les Misérables is the story of mercy versus condemnation, love versus legalism, and hope versus fear. Javert is the inflexible advocate of pitiless judgment. Born himself in prison, his idea of the world consists of obeying rules in order to escape the fate of the prisoners he dominates with harsh and merciless rigidity. He is remorseless in his pursuit of Jean Valjean and cares nothing for his plight, nor for the steps Jean Valjean takes to become a redeemed human being, nor for the sufferings of the impoverished Fantine, nor for the fate of all who depend upon Jean Valjean should he be sent back to prison. Javert understands law, but not love.

In contrast, Jean Valjean's whole life after his encounter with the mercy of God in the person of the bishop is one long struggle to show the mercy he has been shown. Again and again, he risks everything to show mercy. He again "takes up the wood of the cross" by lifting the beam off the man crushed beneath it, jogging Javert's memory. He reveals his identity when a stranger is falsely accused. He adopts Cosette knowing that Javert would know it was he who did it.

Lastly in an astounding moment, when Jean Valjean (who has every reason to hate Javert) has him in his power, he chooses to spare Javert, giving him the same unconditional love and mercy he himself has received.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

Javert consistently sees Jean Valjean only in terms of his failures and transgressions. He tells him "Once a thief, always a thief" and simply ignores all that is good in him. The bishop who had mercy on Jean Valjean speaks of him as his "honored guest" even when he is behaving like a thief. He sees him as if he was Christ and Jean Valjean becomes Christ-like in response. Have you ever known somebody who refused to see what was good in you? Have you ever known somebody who saw Christ in you even

when you could not see him in yourself? Have you ever looked past the surface of another person's outward ugliness and seen Christ in them?

The name "Satan" comes from a Hebrew word that means "accuser." Javert is Jean Valjean's accuser. The bishop is, like the Holy Spirit, Jean Valjean's defender. Have you ever struggled in your heart with the voice of accusation and found Christ—perhaps in the person of a friend or loved one—coming to your defense with mercy for your sins? Have you ever acted as somebody's defender? What happened?

Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:43-48). Jean Valjean's mercy to Javert is a beautiful illustration of this. Like Jesus forgiving the men who crucified him, Jean Valjean gives his mercy freely and without condition, knowing that it is possible Javert will return someday and arrest him. Have you ever known somebody who had an encounter with mercy they did not deserve? Have you ever had an enemy you chose to love or who chose to love and forgive you?

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES TO PONDER:

For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy; yet mercy triumphs over judgment (James 2:8).

See also: Luke 15:11-32; Psalm 112



THE LORD HEARS THE CRY OF THE POOR



Les Misérables is a story filled with Christian compassion for the downtrodden, poor and despised. In the book of Isaiah, the prophet calls to Israel: “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:16-17). *Les Misérables* is a story told against a backdrop of great poverty and suffering for the poor, but also a story that affirms that even a single human being can be an enormous force for good in the lives of many people. In the beginning, Jean Valjean and his fellow convicts are singing bitterly,

“Look down, look down, You’ll always be a slave
Look down, look down, You’re standing in your grave”

But as the story progresses, there is a new theme that grows:

“Look down, and show some mercy if you can
Look down, look down, upon your fellow man”

Jean Valjean is transformed from a man who looks down at his own grave into a man who looks down from the height to which God’s mercy has lifted him and himself shows mercy to his fellow man. As is often the case, it is the occasion of his greatest failure—his neglect of the tragic Fantine’s fate until it is too late—that becomes the engine of his salvation and love of the poor. Distracted by Javert’s pursuit, Jean Valjean leaves Fantine to be dealt with by his overseer and does not notice that he dismisses her. Forced into prostitution to try to provide for her little daughter, Fantine is dying when Jean Valjean finally crosses paths with her and realizes what he has done. So he cares for her in her last hours and takes it upon himself to rescue her little girl Cosette from her squalid circumstances and raise her as his own daughter. In the process he again finds, not condemnation for his sin, but mercy and love.

That love is so profound that when the hour comes, he gives her up so that she may marry her beloved Marius. It is the hardest sacrifice he makes in the entire story, but he has now grown so strong from lifting the wood of the cross, he can do it—and in the process find joy.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

Jesus addresses our treatment of the poor again and again in the gospels. He says, “Blessed are you poor.” He commends the widow who put two copper coins in the temple treasury as giving more than all the rich. He commends generosity and almsgiving. One of his miracles of the resurrection from the dead was done for a poor widow who had lost her only son. He is himself a poor man, having no place to lay his head and having to borrow a coin in order to make a point about rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and unto God what is God’s. And he tells us that the way we treat the “least of these” is the way we treat him. Have you ever struggled with poverty? Have you ever struggled with how you are to treat those around you in material want? Have you ever found yourself poor in other ways besides monetarily? How did you address it?

Monsieur Thénardier and Madame Thénardier, the exploitive and abusive thieves who “care” for Cosette are reminders that mere poverty is not a guarantee of sanctity. But Jean Valjean, though he knows well what sort of people they are, still deals generously with them, even when they betray and threaten him. Ingratitude is one of the hardest things to bear. But Jean Valjean treats their ingratitude with mercy just as his own ingratitude was met with the mercy of God. Have you ever had to extend mercy to ingratitude or found it being extended to you? What was that like?

The single most important figure in Jean Valjean’s heart is Cosette. His whole life revolves around her and he seeks her good above all other things on earth. But as much as he loves her, he knows his duty to God is to let her go when she falls in love with Marius, so he sacrifices his desire to keep her with him for the sake of her good. Have you ever had to sacrifice what you love for the sake of the love of God? Have you ever had somebody sacrifice for you? What happened?

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES TO PONDER:

Then the King will say to those at his right hand, “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?” And the King will answer them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:34-40).

See also: Luke 16:19-31; Mark 10:45

LOVE MEANS SACRIFICE



Jean Valjean's life is one of sacrificial love. Jesus said, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). Jean Valjean imitates Jesus in continually laying down his life in love and friendship, first for a stranger, then for Fantine, then for Cosette, then for Marius, and even for Javert. It is a deeply Christian vision that finds its roots in the words of Mary in the Magnificat: "He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree" (Luke 1:51-52).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

One of the basic principles of the Christian life is the "law of the gift:" as you lay down your life and make a gift of it to others for the sake of the love of God, you receive it back transformed and glorified. We see this, of course, in the resurrection of Jesus, but we also see it in many other ways in life. Spouses lay down their lives in sacrifice for the good of one another. Parents sacrifice for their children. Friends

sacrifice for one another. People sacrifice in many ways. Can you think of somebody who laid down his or her life for you in love, through time, or work, or treasure? Have you sacrificed for others? What was the result? Have you ever had to wait to see God bring fruit from the seed of sacrifice you planted? Is there something you are still waiting for?

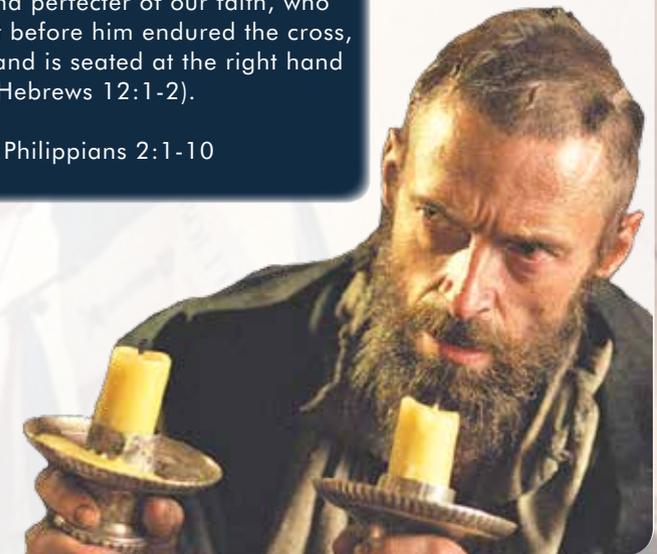
One of the most beautiful and heartbreaking scenes is the sacrifice of the doomed comrades at the barricades, united in love and friendship, but abandoned by the people of Paris. Have you ever known somebody who loved something enough that they thought it worth dying for? Have you ever had a friend who loved you that much or that you have loved that much?

The book of Hebrews speaks of being "surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses." Part of the Christian life is the awareness that our lives do not end here and that death is only a change, not an end, and that those who are united with Christ in his sufferings will be united with him in his resurrection. Many of the characters' lives in *Les Misérables* end with profound hope that the greatest happiness lies not behind, but ahead. Have you ever had the experience of placing hope in God, not merely for earthly things like a job or a date, but for heaven itself? Do you know anybody who lives as though the hope of heaven is a living reality that actually affects their day to day lives, choices, and behavior? Can you try to begin living that way?

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES TO PONDER:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:1-2).

See also: John 12:24; Philippians 2:1-10



Les Misérables



Available on Blu-ray™ Combo Pack and DVD on March 22, 2013
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<http://www.lesmiserablesfilm.com/>

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