



from the desk of . . .

**Rande Wayne Smith**

D.Min., Th.M., M.Div.

**#783**

**24 December 2017**

## **Jesus At The Movies - 4**

### **IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE**

**John 10:10**

Listen now to *Good News*, as spoken by Jesus, & recorded by John.

Within your hearing comes the Word of the Lord ...

"I have come in order that you might have life - life in all its fullness." (John 10:10)

**May the Lord grant that we may engage in contemplating the mysteries of His Heavenly wisdom with really increasing devotion, to His glory and to our edification. Amen**

During Advent we've been talking about "Jesus At The Movies." We began with "A Christmas Carol" ... where we saw that God is the God of 2<sup>nd</sup> chances. Next, we looked at "A Christmas Story" ... & the priceless gift that has been given to us. (2 Corinthians 9:15) Last Sunday it was "Miracle On 34<sup>th</sup> Street" ... & we learned that faith is not naively trusting in the impossible; it's wisely trusting in the invisible.

This morning we conclude with "It's A Wonderful Life."

Now let me be clear from the outset. "It's A Wonderful Life" is not a "Christian" movie. But it is filled with countless spiritual realities. It's a film that focuses on the meaning of life, the value of each individual, the rewards associated with self-sacrifice, the indispensability of community,  
& the interconnectedness of the human family.

We're going to look at several scenes this morning ... & in each we'll discover an important theological truth. And the 1<sup>st</sup> one comes right at the beginning of the movie.

**(start at 1:16 & end at 3:01)**

All we know for sure as the movie starts is that a man named George Bailey is in trouble ... so much so that he's contemplating suicide. Lots of people who love & care for him are praying. And God hears their prayers.

God listens to our prayers! Isn't that amazing? ...

"I, the LORD, have heard your prayer & seen your tears."

(2 Kings 20:5)

"God hears us." (1 John 5:15)

And not only does God hear our prayers ... He responds to them!

And that's certainly the case in this movie.

- Mr. Gower, the druggist ... "I owe everything to George Bailey. Help him, dear Father."
- Mr. Martini, the bar owner ...  
"Jesus, help my friend, Mr. Bailey."
- George's mother ... "Help my son George tonight."
- Bert, the policeman ... "He never thinks about himself, God; that's why he's in trouble."
- Ernie, the cab driver ...  
"George is a good guy. Give him a break, God."
- Mary, his wife ...  
"I love him, dear Lord. Watch over him tonight."
- His 8-year-old daughter ...  
"Please, God, something's the matter with Daddy."
- And finally, Zuzu, his youngest daughter ...  
"Please bring Daddy back."

This is what prayer is about. When we're in need, we can call out to a merciful, loving Father who welcomes His children's cry for help, & responds to our pleas.

There are a # of prayers throughout this movie, & the thing I like most about them is that they're "non-churchy" prayers. Sadly, for many people, prayer has become almost a memorized mantra.

But as I read the N.T., for the most part, prayer is not reserved for the synagogue or Temple. It's a gutsy, conversational utterance that's rooted in a real need with honest communication.

- Peter, sinking in the stormy waves ... "Save me, Lord!"  
(Matthew 14:30)
- The criminal on the cross ... "Remember me, Jesus,  
when you come as King!" (Luke 23:42)
- The father of the boy with the evil spirit ... "I do  
have faith, but not enough. Help me have more!"  
(Mark 9:24)
- Even Jesus' own prayers ... "Father, if you will,  
take this cup of suffering from me." (Luke 22:42)

The view of prayer we see in "It's A Wonderful Life" is the same one that Paul invites us to consider in his letter to the Philippians ... "Don't worry about anything, but in all your prayers ask God for what you need, always asking him with a thankful heart." (Philippians 4:6)

So, in this opening scene we're introduced to a timeless theological truth. No matter what it is that's going on in our lives, God is aware of it & has the resources to help us deal with it.

But He waits for us to come to Him & express our need.

This is probably a good time to straighten out one minor theological issue that surfaces in this movie. The film imagines that people who die & go to Heaven become angels, who must then "earn their wings" by doing some good thing for those of us still on earth.

Apparently, this is Hollywood's version of the afterlife, but it certainly isn't what Scripture teaches.

We don't become angels when we die.

What's more, there's nothing in Scripture that indicates that angels have to "earn" their wings ... or that all angels even have wings for that matter. Angels are a completely separate kind of creature that God made.

(Hebrews 1:14)

Having said that, the good news that "It's A Wonderful Life" proclaims in this very 1<sup>st</sup> scene is the same Good News that the angel announced to Joseph, who was contemplating whether to marry Mary or not. (Matthew 1:23) ... "We are not alone. God is with us." And the coming of Jesus Christ into the world at Christmas proves that amazing understanding once & for all.

Now George Bailey is going to have to learn that lesson later on, but we, the viewers, are let in on the secret at the very beginning ... God is with us.

As we see in this next clip, George is a man who has dreams ... dreams go far beyond the small town of Bedford Falls, & the Building & Loan that his father wants him to work at.

**(16:40-18:13 & 26:03-26:45)**

George Baily has his whole life planned out ... or so it seems. From the time he was a boy reading travel brochures & the National Geographic, he has calculated what he needs to do to see the world & seek his fortune.

But ... & this is a "spoiler alert" for any of you who haven't seen this movie ... (is that possible?) ... cover your ears. George never leaves Bedford Falls.

His dreams are derailed by circumstances that demand more than he has counted on. In *George Bailey* we see someone who reminds us of the rich young man Jesus encountered in His ministry.

Here was this rather self-confident, almost cocky, individual who approaches Jesus. Matthew, Mark, & Luke all tell us that he was rich. Matthew adds that he was **YOUNG**. (Matthew 19:20)

Luke informs us that he was a "Jewish leader." (Luke 18:18)

This was a guy who had his life planned out, & was accomplishing all he set out to do. But then Jesus threw him a curve ... & the fellow "went away sad." (Matthew 19:22)

We read in James ...

"Now listen to me, you that say, 'Today or tomorrow we will travel to a certain city, where we will stay a year & go into business & make a lot of money.' You don't even know what your life tomorrow will be!" (James 4:13-14)

"People may plan all kinds of things, but the LORD'S will is going to be done." (The Proverbs 19:21)

One of my favorite passages of Scripture, which actually proved very prophetic for me,  
has the Lord speaking ...

"I know the plans I have in mind for you.  
They are plans for peace, not disaster,  
to give you a future filled with hope." (Jeremiah 29:11)

I was a guy who had my life all planned out ... & those plans never included becoming a Pastor. I wanted to own a restaurant, (which I did for a while), & live my entire life in Indiana, PA. George's plans were to travel the world, & become an architect.

But God had something different in mind. And looking back on my life I certainly haven't had any regrets. And I suspect if we could talk with George Bailey ... he didn't have any either.

In this next scene, George is about to leave for college after tying up loose ends at the Building & Loan.

His father's business rival, Mr. Potter, tries to persuade the Board of Directors to shut down the institution. Potter, who owns the only bank in town, wants to keep the people poor & dependent on him.

**(32:10-33:49 & 34:11-35:00)**

Mr. Potter is bent on controlling Bedford Falls. From his wheelchair, this Scrooge-like Grinch schemes in devious ways to arrive at his self-centered goals.

He's not only paralyzed from the waist down ... the muscles of his heart seem to lack feeling as well.

He may be the richest man in town, (at the start of the movie), but his bedside manner is pathetic. He calls Peter Bailey a "miserable failure" to his face,  
& refers to Uncle Billy as an "idiot."

In his final scene in the film Potter puts out a warrant for George's arrest.

Potter despises the Baileys. He resents that, despite living on the financial edge, they seem to have found a certain peace, contentment, & purpose. And it galls him that despite his enormous wealth,  
he doesn't have any of those.

The Baileys care about others.  
Potter cares only about himself.

At one point a Pharisee approaches Jesus with the question ... "which is the greatest commandment?" Jesus replies ... "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, & with all your mind.'

This is the greatest & most important commandment.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> most important commandment is like it:  
'Love your neighbor as you love yourself.'" (Matthew 22:36-38)

In other words, what matters most in life isn't having money & things, but enjoying relationships with people & God. That's our purpose. That's what we're called to do. Which is why Potter is such a lonely man.  
Because he just doesn't get it.

His priorities are totally wrong.

When we try to fill our emptiness with something other than what God intended ...

riches instead of relationships ... we're doomed.

"Those who want to get rich," the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, "fall into temptation & are caught in the trap of many foolish & harmful desires, which pull them down to ruin & destruction. For the love of money is a source of all kinds of evil. Some have been so eager to have it that they have wandered away from the faith & have broken their hearts with many sorrows." (1 Timothy 6:9-10)

And that's certainly a lesson that comes out of "It's A Wonderful Life." It's George, not Potter, who winds up with "a full life." Not because of that basket of money. No, it's because he realizes, more clearly than ever, where true riches lie ...

not in money or things, but in relationships.

In this next scene, after years of trying to shut down the Building & Loan,

Potter has a proposition for George.

**(1:09:00 - 1:10:46)**

When Mr. Potter sees that the Bailey Building & Loan cannot be put out of business by his maneuverings, he then tempts George Bailey to work for him.

We see that George is attempting to make a living & care for his family on a measly salary of \$45 a week. That's a \$180 a month or \$2,160 a year. Obviously, George is overtired, overworked, & underpaid.

(In today's \$'s George would be making a little more than \$30,000 a year.)

Recognizing that he has George in a vulnerable spot, Mr. Potter says ... "I want you to manage my affairs, run my properties. George, I'll start you out at \$20,000 a year." (That would be like \$280,000.)

George is obviously tempted by such a lucrative offer ... a temptation that could easily have cost him his character.

Jesus Himself faced a stiff temptation. He had been out in the desert, with nothing to eat for 40 days. So, Satan seized the occasion & appeals to Jesus' hunger. He tempts the Son of God to turn one of the rocks into a loaf of bread.

He then tempts Jesus to throw Himself off the highest point in the Temple in order to be rescued by angels ... (& not Clarence, by the way).

Finally, he tempts Jesus to worship him & he'll give Him all the kingdoms on earth ...

all He has to do is sign on the dotted line. (Matthew 4:1-10)

Both George Bailey & Jesus were being tempted with ...  
"come on, you deserve this."

One of the most harmful things in life is believing that we deserve good things ... that we're entitled to life's benefits, that we have a right to God's blessings.

(Luke 17:11)

And if we feel entitled, then we'll never be satisfied or content. We'll always compare ourselves with others & assume we got the short end of the stick.

We'll always want more. And we won't be grateful.

George Bailey's response in the presence of Mr. Potter is what Jesus did in the presence of personified evil. As tempting as the "benefits" appeared to be ... both men recognized the hidden costs associated with such a transaction.

George compares Mr. Potter to a spider that traps clueless victims in a web. The Apostle Peter likens the Tempter to a wild beast intent on consuming its' prey.

"Be alert, be on watch! Your enemy, the Devil, roams around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour."

(1 Peter 5:8)

Peter strongly believes that temptation isn't a threat ... it's a given. It's going to happen. Satan's desire is to trip us up. We have to be listening for those soft paw steps of this "big slinking cat". We can't relax in our walk with the Lord.

James writes ... "Resist the Devil,  
& he will run away from you." (James 4:7)

Yes, there are "Potter's" who appear in every age & in every place & are known by different names. Each one is an ambassador of the Devil who is intent on derailing disciples of Jesus Christ.

Well, George ends up rejecting Potter's offer ... but in doing so, recognizes that he has little to show for his life's work.

In fact, on Christmas Eve, after his absent-minded Uncle Billy misplaces a deposit that today would amount to over \$80,000, George fears that he's lost what little he does have ... & even faces possible prison time, because he's going to take the fall for Billy's mistake.

The police will think George embezzled the money. Potter even accuses him of gambling it away or spending it on women. After George considers the value of his life insurance policy, he decides that he's worth more dead than alive.

In a rage, he leaves his family on Christmas Eve & goes to a bar & prays a prayer. He later contemplates ending his life by jumping off a bridge into an icy river.

**(1:35:36-1:36:19 ... 1:40:38-1:41:03)**

Jesus told the following Parable ...

"Once there were 2 men who went up to the Temple to pray: one was a Pharisee, the other a tax collector.

"The Pharisee stood apart by himself & prayed, 'I thank you, God, that I am not greedy, dishonest, or an adulterer, like everybody else. I thank you that I am not like that tax collector over there. I fast 2 days a week, & I give you 1/10<sup>th</sup> of all my income.' But the tax collector stood at a distance & would not even raise his face to heaven, but beat on his breast & said, 'God, have pity on me, a sinner!' 'I tell you,' said Jesus, 'the tax collector, & not the Pharisee, was in the right with God when he went home.'" (Luke 18:10-14)

George tells God ... "I'm not a praying man." Like the tax collector in Jesus' parable, he knows he isn't worthy to ask God to do anything for him ... but he's desperate.

We often do our best praying when we're desperate; when we honestly realize that we're helpless & totally dependent on God.

I love that George calls God "Father," the way Jesus taught us. (Matthew 6:9) Parents, especially at Christmastime, know all too well that their children have no trouble asking for exactly what they want ... & asking repeatedly. They have no shame. If only we acted more like God's children & boldly asked our Heavenly Father, directly & simply & repeatedly, for what we wanted!

Well, George does that ... & God answers his prayer. Not exactly the how he expects ...  
but in a more "miraculous" way.

In "It's a Wonderful Life", the miracle isn't simply that an angel from Heaven & intervenes to keep George from killing himself, but, independently of all that, George's wife, Mary, gets on the phone & calls all the grateful townspeople whose lives George changed for the better ... & they come through with the missing money.

Was it just a coincidence that George prayed, & Mary prayed, her family prayed, & the townspeople prayed, & in the end George had all the money he needed? ... I don't think so.

I like what the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, said many years ago ...

"When I pray, coincidences happen;  
when I stop praying, the coincidences stop happening."

Mary herself calls the town's generosity a miracle, & indeed, it is! Miracles happen all the time because through all of life's circumstances ... God is with us, loving us, caring for us, always working for our good.

(Romans 8:28)

We see the miracle of the townspeople's generosity in this final scene. But notice how the joy & gratitude & peace that George experiences happens before he finds out that he isn't financially ruined, & isn't going to prison.

It's as if he's discovered a contentment that doesn't depend on the external circumstances of his life.

(Philippians 4:7)

George has a peace that isn't dependent on how successful he is, or what people think of him, or how much money he has, or how he measures up to others, or whatever hardship he's facing.

**2:02:50 - 2:03:46**

**2:05:05 - 2:05:11**

**2:05:54 - 2:06:05**

**2:07:19 - 2:08:27**

In "It's A Wonderful Life" the movie deals with the question ... what would have happened had George Bailey never been born? ...  
And we learned what an impact his "wonderful life" made.

But the question that you & I need to come to grips with this morning is ...

"what if Jesus had never been born?" ...

C.S. Lewis imagined such a Christ-less planet in his "children's story "The Lion, The Witch & The Wardrobe." The world he conceived was called Narnia. Paralyzed under the frozen spell of the White Witch was a world where it was "always winter but never Christmas."

Well, let me say that our world would be drastically different. Not only wouldn't there be Christmas ... but we'd have no Valentine's Day, St. Patrick's Day, Easter, or Thanksgiving.

(Each of those holidays are associated with Christianity.)

But the absence of Jesus' presence in history would impact more than just our national holidays.

If Jesus had never been born ...

- Children would be seen as having little value
- Women would be viewed as property
- God would be unapproachable
- Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Yale, Princeton would not have been founded
- The Art Institute of Chicago would not have many of the world's great masterpieces
- The Red Cross, Salvation Army, Alcoholics Anonymous, Catholic Charities wouldn't exist
- Nor would the ministries of Billy Graham, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Chuck Colson, &
- The cross would be the most hated symbol anywhere

But we don't have to think about that. History points to the fact that Jesus was born. Biographies of His life have survived 2,000 years. Millions of His followers can attest to the tangible change they have experienced because of a relationship with Him.

We can't explain the mysteries & wonders of our world without accepting the fact that Christ was born. Simply put, we can't imagine our world without the existence of Christmas. And because of that ... we can have a wonderful life ... "life in all its fullness."

**MARANA THA**

# Finding God

Finding God in Bedford Falls?  
By George, I have. Will you?  
Like Waldo He keeps showing up  
amid the many clues.  
He's there at old man Gower's store,  
and in the Granville home.  
You'll find Him there at Harry's prom  
or as George prays alone.  
He's there beside young Zuzu's bed  
and at Martini's bar.  
To find the Lord within this film,  
you need not look that far.  
He's there when Mr. Potter tries  
to trap George in his web.  
And He is there when George gives up  
and wishes he was dead.  
Although you'll never see His face,  
God's fingerprints abound  
within this movie millions love.  
The plot is holy ground!

... Greg Asimakoupoulos