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Dear Friends,

***“The Law came in so that the transgression would increase;  
but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more. . .” Romans 5:20***

Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* is one of my favorite stories. The conflict between law and grace is powerful as the story weaves the lives of Jean Valjean, a convict turned repentant, and Inspector Javert, a prison warden and guardian of the law. As I recently watched the latest version of the story, played out in the movie theater, it reminded me to pray for our Advocates that they might show the grace of God's forgiveness, even as they practice the justice of the law.

If you haven't yet read the book, or seen the musical or movie versions of *Les Misérables*, I encourage you to do so. There are almost 100 adaptations worldwide of the book, both on screen and on stage. The most recent version, still in theaters across the globe, adapts to the screen the wildly popular 1980 musical, and can serve as an excellent opportunity to share the story of God's grace and forgiveness through Christ. Enclosed with this letter is the pastoral letter that my pastor wrote to my church 25 years ago and shared with us again this past week. Victor Hugo's powerful story of two men and their encounters with grace offers each of us a chance to weigh our own response to the grace of God.

Thank you so very much for your continued prayers for our Advocates around the globe and for our ministry to them. We couldn't do what we do without your prayers and support and this month we want to let you know how much we appreciate you. Thank you. Please let us know on the enclosed slip if you have any special prayer requests or needs so that we can pray with you.

May the Lord bless and keep you in His perfect. . .

Grace and Peace



Brent McBurney  
President & CEO

*Doing Justice with Compassion*

## *Christ Our Shepherd Church, Pastoral Letter, August 1988*

*(reprinted with permission)*

Dearest Family,

Last week Celia and I were given a very special gift for our wedding anniversary – a couple of tickets for “Les Misérables” at the Kennedy Center. I have witnessed some of the great productions of classical theatre in Shakespeare’s Stratford and in London, but I must say that this performance ranks with the best of them. It deals with the big themes: good and evil, romance and unrequited love, the haves and the have-nots, idealism and cynicism, heroism and cowardice, sacrifice and avarice, suffering and solace, salvation and damnation. It presents life in the raw, and in the round. But above all, the streets of Paris at the time of the barricades become the setting for an agonizing conflict between law and grace. The facts of death, disease, tyranny, poverty, betrayal combine to pose a single question: is there a redemption? The story begins with Jean Valjean being released on parole after serving 19 years in the chain gang for stealing a loaf of bread. The opening scene depicts this slave labor as the convicts, backs bloodied and spirits broken, somberly sing “Look down, look down!” Implicitly, one longs for evidence that there is reason to look up, to have hope, to experience mercy. An encounter with a saintly bishop melts the years of Jean’s embittered servitude, but not before he has committed another crime. He repays the bishop’s kindness by stealing some silverware from the table, but when the police catch the fleeing Valjean, find the silver and bring him back to the bishop, they are told by the cleric that the silver is a gift for Jean. The bishop then goes a step further and in front of the police, gives the thief the silver candlesticks as well!

This experience of mercy and forgiveness transforms Valjean’s life and he makes a new start. However, it hardens the policeman Javert, the representative of the law, and the rest of the drama is woven together by Javert’s pursuit of Valjean, by the fear of the law hounding the freedom of grace. I won’t spoil it for those of you who may get to see it, but Valjean brings life and liberty to others through his own acts of mercy, while he remains a bearer of burdens who describes his pilgrimage as “this never-ending road to Calvary.” Javert is driven to distraction and ultimately to torment by this man who has so evidently fallen from grace, yet who clearly is a liberated soul. He sings, “He knows his way in the dark / But mine is the way of the Lord / And those who follow the path of the righteous shall have their reward / And if they fall as Lucifer fell / The flame, the sword!” Like the Pharisees of old, he insists that those who fall pay the price. To countenance that an enemy can be forgiven is to experience hell for the Javerts of this world. To make matters worse, Valjean spares Javert’s life at a later part in the action. Grace gives Javert the ultimate opportunity to change, to forgive, to repent and relent but his tragedy is that he is unable to do so. Ironically, he now calls Valjean the devil.

*All it would take  
Was a flick of his knife.  
Vengeance was his and he gave me back my life!  
Damned if I’ll live in the debt of a thief  
Damned if I’ll yield at the end of the chase  
I am the Law and the Law is not mocked  
I’ll spit his pity right back in his face  
There is nothing on earth that we share  
It is either Valjean or Javert!*

*How can I now allow this man  
To hold dominion over me?  
This desperate man that I have hunted  
He gave me my life. He gave me freedom.  
I should have perished by his hand  
It was his right  
It was my right to die as well.  
Instead, I live... but live in a hell.  
And my thoughts fly apart*

*Can this man be believed?  
Shall his sins be forgiven?  
Shall his crimes be reprieved?  
And must I now begin to doubt,  
Who never doubted all those years?  
My heart is stone and still it trembles  
The world I have known is lost in shadow.  
Is he from heaven or from hell?*

*And does he know  
That, granting me my life today  
This man has killed me even so?  
I am reaching but I fall  
And the stars are black and cold  
As I stare into the void  
Of a world that cannot hold.  
I'll escape now from the world  
From the world of Jean Valjean.  
There is nowhere I can go  
There is no way to go on...*

These words, and the self-destruction of Javert, are in stark contrast to the final prayer of Valjean: “Forgive me all my trespasses and take me to your glory.” The musical leaves us with the image of the barricades, the dividing line between desire and despair, between the past and the future, between life and death, as the chorus asks: “Somewhere beyond the barricade is there a world you long to see?” Of course, there is much ambiguity at the end of the play, in that an explicit Christocentric answer is not given. However, there is a clear reminder that to resist the grace of God is death—to receive it is life.

The audience has witnessed too much not to realize that the life beyond the barricades has to do with a choice that they must make. You cannot leave the opera house with a cozy feeling that it is a nice pastime to dream of a utopia in the never-never, where everything is transformed by magic. Remember, magic operates by sleight of hand, by deception, and the devil has always been the greatest supporter of utopian ideals and theories, for they represent a counterfeit to the redemption that was wrought by Christ *in our history*, and *through suffering*. The problem of sin and its consequent suffering, represented by the streets of Paris of Victor Hugo’s day, was not an intellectual puzzle demanding a neat mathematical solution or an imaginative social theory. The atonement was not a cerebral exercise that involved deity in a few mental headaches. The gospel does not present us with a new equation of acts and figures, but with disfigurement in extremis, with God reconciling the world to himself in the person of Christ, mentally assaulted, physically brutalized and finally, spiritually alienated. This side of the barricades, my side, he cried, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” But because of his obedience unto death he was raised by the Father. An extraordinary thing happened. He wasn’t simply resurrected the other side of the barricade, the side where I really wanted to be. He actually destroyed the barricade. Of course, I could choose to ignore that fact and either continue to live as if the barricade was still there, or actually rebuild it! I could choose like Javert to cling to my definitions of what decency and the humanity are all about and deny the work of grace as an illusion. I could choose to believe the teachings of the evolutionists and mechanists, determinists and rationalists and conclude that I had to put up with the misery and make the best of it. I could go along with the politicians and the sociologists, the psychologists and the therapists and believe that the sewers of Paris can be re-organized, upgraded, disinfected. I could enlist with the romantics and the mystics and dream of other-worldly panaceas. Or I can live beyond the barricade with Christ, the only one who can change life in this world, who can reorient me for the world to come by giving me eternal life in the here and now. He is the only creative genius I know that can change “Les Misérables” into “Les Joyeux!” As I write, I recall the line of a song that I used to sing when I was on an evangelistic team in Europe: “De ma misère a ma joie, il n’y a que Jésus!” Here’s to joy beyond the barricades... now and forever!

Yours,

Stuart