

BaptistWay Bible Series for October 7: It's a wonderful life

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It's a wonderful life

- Romans 5:1-11

[By Andrew Daugherty](#)

Christ Church, Rockwall

It might strain our credulity to compare the Christian life to a Jimmy Stewart movie. However, consider the connection between the iconic American film, *It's a Wonderful Life*, and the Apostle Paul's theological account of justification by faith, including themes of suffering and hope.

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Set on Christmas Eve, the film features the main character, George Bailey

(played by Jimmy Stewart), who is faced with the certain bankruptcy of his family business. He is liable for an \$8,000 deficit at his family's savings and loan association, which would result in jail time; not to mention the shame it would bring on his family while leaving the town to the greedy devices of the spiteful banker, Mr. Potter.

George's panic leads him to think the citizens of Bedford Falls and his wife and children would be better off without him. Overwhelmed by his own (distorted) sense of personal failure, George contemplates suicide. But thanks to the prayers of the people of Bedford Falls and even the prayers of his own household, a guardian angel named Clarence comes to rescue George by persuading him of his goodness.

Through flashbacks of his life, Clarence shows George how much worse off the town would be without him. He convinces him his life was deeply meaningful and his caring for the working-class people of the town had affected them in powerful and positive ways. Despite the despair and disillusionment George felt, Clarence helped him understand that his life truly was a gift.

The life choices he made to sacrifice his personal ambition for the benefit of others made him an agent of redemption. His life was wonderful, because his life was redemptive.

The Christ figure in this film is the angel, Clarence, who leaves the luxuries of heaven to come to earth to persuade George his life was filled with goodness and wonder. Rather than being anyone else's enemy, though, George was an enemy of himself. Whatever hatred and ill-will this righteous man possessed, George aimed it squarely at himself.

Have you ever considered that God sent us the gift of Christ to persuade us of our own goodness? If our goodness derives from our positive relationship to God, Jesus' life reveals the dramatic measures God takes to re-establish

diplomatic relations with humanity.

Just as we did nothing to earn the right to be born, Paul says we are justified through no act of our own. It literally took an act of God in order for us to have standing in God's grace. Therefore, we cannot boast about our justification arrogantly as if we are self-made. We only can boast in what God has accomplished through the person of Jesus who used divine diplomacy to negotiate a peace treaty on our behalf to ensure our good standing as God's people. Christ redeems human beings in order that human beings might be redemptive.

Paul wastes no time transitioning from his preceding remarks about justification. Just as Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness, so all are people credited with righteousness who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. "Therefore," Paul says, peace is the product of being justified by faith.

Notice this peace is a present reality even in the midst of unfavorable circumstances. Often preachers and church leaders talk about peace as if it were the result of our knowing we are going to heaven one day when we die. The thinking goes that if we can only survive this life, we'll be rewarded in the life to come.

Such other-worldly optimism is lost on Paul, here. Perhaps a more faithful rendering of Paul's words would be to contemplate how the effects of God's gift to us through Christ make a difference in this life before considering its impact for the next. Since justification and peace are present realities, how might this make a practical difference in our lives now?

Certainly there is a "real-time" dimension to the effects of Christ's work. This is most evident in Paul's understanding of suffering that produces endurance, and endurance that produces character, and the character that produces hope (5:3-4).

Suffering can produce endurance, but sometimes human suffering can be so severe that to boast about it may sound as illogical as praying for the opportunity to suffer in order that character can be developed. To quote Paul elsewhere in his writings, "God forbid!"

Many experiences of suffering appear grossly disproportionate to the kind of character produced by it. Perhaps you have known people who have been through such trying times that you have said, "Lord, maybe there's meaning in their suffering, but don't you think that is a little too much!?"

Surely a person disillusioned by clinical depression has felt the distant otherness of God. National tragedies like 9/11 reveal a deep dissonance between the present experience of human pain and Paul's talk of hope that does not let us down (5:4). Anyone who grieves the atrocities of war must despair over the continuing deaths of U.S. troops and Iraqi civilians and the 1.1 million Iraqi refugees that have been driven from their homes and country. The enduring conflict between Israelis and Palestinians and the constant global threat of nuclear war wears thin our political patience and spiritual stamina.

When we consider Paul's words to the Romans about boasting in our sufferings, we must likewise acknowledge the various manifestations of human suffering that challenge our understandings of spiritual hope. These sufferings are both personal and communal. They are felt in our world, our communities, and even within ourselves. What Christ did about them is the basis of our hope. What we do about them is the expression of our love. And it is a wonderful life, because it is the redemptive life.

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