

IT REALLY IS A WONDERFUL LIFE**1 JOHN 5:11-13**

On these four Sundays of Advent preceding Christmas Day itself, I want to use some classic Christmas movies to illustrate some major, biblical truths of the Christmas season. We'll look at a few brief clips from these movies each week as a way of doing just that. I would guess that the most popular Christmas movie out there is still "It's A Wonderful Life." The movie is about a man named George Bailey – a kind, likeable man who feels like his opportunity to make it in life has passed him by. George had big ambitions and big dreams, but over and over again he sacrificed those ambitions and dreams to meet the needs of others. Then on Christmas Eve Day, he comes face to face with a monumental crisis. His Uncle Billy accidentally loses an \$8,000 deposit which will sink George's humble savings and loan company that he inherited from his father. The loss of the money will probably put George in jail. The crisis makes him question the value of his own life. He thinks seriously about suicide. The movie underlines the preciousness of life and the significance of every human life. Life is one of the major themes in the Bible itself. It's one of the major themes in the Christmas story. Let's look at one passage that speaks of life and see how it relates to the birth of Jesus.

Is this life really wonderful? You might say, "Rick, that all depends." We've all had times when it seems we have life by the tail - everything's going our way. Then, it's easy to say, "You bet; life sure is wonderful!" But we've also all had times when we felt defeated, stressed out and deeply saddened by life's events. Then, we're more likely to say, "Are you kidding? Life is anything but wonderful." Here's three reasons why every Christian can say every day of his or her life, "It really is a wonderful life!" You may say it through tears, through deep sighs and despite the presence of negative, difficult factors, but you can say it. First...

LIFE IS WONDERFUL BECAUSE GOD INTERVENES.

The movie "It's A Wonderful Life" begins with a scene where people are praying for George Bailey and then three angels decide someone needs to go to his aid. Let's watch that scene from the movie just now:

The movie reminds us of an important, biblical truth. God regularly intervenes in this world. The Bible teaches that God is so great and awesome that He's beyond your comprehension, but that doesn't mean God is distant and disinterested in you or me. In fact, the Bible teaches that God is passionately concerned and intimately involved in all aspect of His creation. Jesus said, "Five sparrows are sold for just two pennies, but God doesn't forget a one of them. Even the hairs on your head are counted. So don't be afraid! You are worth much more than many sparrows." (Luke 12:6-7 CEV)

God's intervention is one of the great themes of Christmas. Jesus' birth was an intervention. That word "intervention" conveys the idea that the existing situation

before the intervention was wrong or harmful in some way. When parents have to intervene at home, it's usually because their kids are trying to kill each other. When someone's addicted to drugs, their family and friends often intervene. As many of you know, Cheryl regularly intervenes when I want dessert or ice cream!

The fact of the matter is that Christmas is the constant reminder that God did intervene and continues to intervene in your life and mine. Every one of us is born into a sinful world that has rebelled against its Creator. Every one of us has inherited a sin nature that separates us from God from day one. The Bible says, "All of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory." (Rom. 3:23 CEV) As a result, the Bible is clear about what we deserve. "Work hard for sin your whole life and your pension is death...." (Rom. 6:23 MSG) You can't make yourself right with God. You can never ever earn or deserve a personal relationship with an absolutely holy God. You can't save yourself from sin's pension – death.

God had to intervene and He did. God loved you so much that He sent His Son into this world. God became a human being in the person of Jesus. Why? The primary reason was to die in your place. Jesus Himself said, "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matt. 20:28 NLT) God knew you could never save yourself. He knew that the only hope of our being in Heaven for eternity with Him depended entirely on His intervention. We celebrate God's intervention every Christmas.

Now life would be wonderful enough simply on the basis of God's intervention in the past. But the Bible reveals that God intervenes in the present and will continue to intervene in the future. Every time a person becomes a follower of Jesus, it's God intervening. Every time your prayers are answered, it's God intervening. The Bible tells us that in the future Jesus will return again in great power and glory. Satan will be finally defeated and the new Heavens and the new Earth will be our eternal home. The Bible says, "What God has planned for people who love him is more than eyes have seen or ears have heard. It has never even entered our minds!" (1 Cor. 2:9 CEV) Part of what makes life really wonderful now and today is the prospect of all that God promises in the future. Life is wonderful because God intervenes. Second...

LIFE IS WONDERFUL BECAUSE JESUS GIVES IT PURPOSE.

The author of the scripture passage there in 1 John was one of Jesus' disciples. He makes it clear that this new life you receive when you put your trust in Jesus is something very special and unique. The Bible teaches that there are different kinds of life. There's ordinary, physical life. There's also spiritual and eternal life which is the life by which God Himself lives. The Bible says that every person is born physically alive but spiritually dead. In other words, your inner spirit is largely unresponsive to God and the things of God. But then the Holy Spirit puts into you a desire to know and relate to God. If you surrender to the wooing of the Holy Spirit, you will end up putting your trust in Jesus. You will accept what He

has done for you by faith and you will start to surrender to His Lordship of your life increasingly. You begin to live spiritually. That life is also eternal because it's the life of God within you. Yes, you'll still die some day physically. We all will. But if you have put your trust in Jesus, you will never die spiritually and one day in the future God will also give you a new, physical body in which you will spend eternity with Him. Listen again to what the Bible says, "He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life." (1 John 5:12 NIV) What life is this? The spiritual, eternal life of God.

What makes God's life in you wonderful isn't all about the future, however. God's life – the life of the risen Lord in you – makes this everyday, walking around life really wonderful as well. How so? It fills your life with purpose. God created each of us for a purpose: to worship Him, to become like Jesus in our character, to serve God in some kind of way, to share with others what Jesus has done for us, and to enjoy deep, meaningful relationships with other people in God's family. Your life matters to God and others. Your life does indeed have a purpose which is all wrapped up in the Lord Jesus Christ. This whole idea of having a purpose in life - as well as the value or significance of every life – is a major theme in the movie "It's A Wonderful Life." Let's watch this next scene where George experiences what it would be like to have never been born.

Can you imagine what life would be like – what this world would be like – if Jesus had never come? A few years ago our family went to see a Christmas show that featured the Rockettes at the Ohio Theatre. It was fun, light, family oriented entertainment. I was both amazed and pleased, however, at how they ended the show. They had a live nativity and then recited a well known piece entitled "One Solitary Life." I thought that was very unusual for a secular piece of entertainment today. They didn't have to point the audience to Jesus, but they did! It was a reminder of the enduring impact of Jesus of Nazareth. No one has had a greater impact upon this world than the One we recognize and revere as Savior and Lord. Here's a portion of that reading entitled "One Solitary Life":

"Born in an obscure village, He was the child of a peasant woman. He worked in a carpenter shop until He was thirty years old, and then for three years He traveled around the country, stopping long enough to talk and to listen to people, and help where He could. He never wrote a book. He never had a hit record. He never went to college. He never ran for public office. He never had a family or owned a home.... But when He was thirty-three years old, the tide of public opinion turned against Him, and His friends rejected Him.... After the trial, He was executed by the State along with admitted thieves... This all happened nineteen centuries ago, and yet today He is the leading figure of all the human race, and the ultimate example of love. Now, it is no exaggeration to say that all the armies that have ever marched, all the navies that have ever set sail, all the rulers that have ever ruled, all the kings that have ever reigned on this earth, all put together have not affected the life of man on earth like this One Solitary Life."

When God lives in you, you will also have a powerful and positive upon other people for Him. That's another fact that makes this life wonderful. God uses you and me to bring encouragement to the discouraged, to help provide food, clothing and shelter to those who need life's necessities, to offer comfort and hope to the grieving, to be a friend to the lonely, and to offer love and acceptance to those who've messed up in this life. Most important of all, God wants to use you to point other people to His Son, Jesus - so that they come to understand what Jesus did for them and to receive the same eternal life you've received.

The more Christ-like you are, the more impact your life will have on others. The movie "It's A Wonderful Life" never mentions Jesus, but it demonstrates that George Bailey's life had a great impact precisely because he acted in essentially Christ-like ways towards others. When he was a boy, he saved his brother's life at the risk of his own life and the loss of hearing in one ear. He prevented his first employer, a pharmacist, from accidentally giving someone poison instead of medicine. He gave up his own ambitions and dream to leave Bedford Falls, so his brother could go to college instead. He rejected the temptation of wealth and financial security dangled in front of him by the town villain, Henry Potter. This world suggests that if you want to have an impact be self-centered, be ambitious, and promote yourself. The real story is very different. Jesus said, "If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul?" (Matt. 16:25-26 NLT) This life really can be wonderful if you make it your goal to be like the Lord Jesus Christ in your choices, in your actions, in your attitudes and in your relationships. When you do that, your life finds the true purpose for which it was made. Third...

LIFE IS WONDERFUL BECAUSE OF THE ETERNAL JOY YET TO COME.

Part of what makes the Christmas season so wonderful is the anticipation. Opening the presents under the tree! Great times with family and friends! The food! Part of what makes life in the Lord Jesus Christ so wonderful is the anticipation. One day you and I are going to be in His presence forever and we will know a joy beyond description. Maybe everyone's favorite scene in the movie "It's A Wonderful Life" is the one we're about to watch now.

That had to be the most joyful, happiest moment in George Bailey's life. There was relief at not having to go to jail. There was joy in discovering how precious his wife and kids were to him. There was thanksgiving at the generosity and love of his friends in the community. What would you say has been the happiest, most joyful moment of your life up to this point in time? Here's what I know. Gather up all the great, joyous, wonderful moments in your life and mine and all of them together will never begin even to scratch the surface of what Heaven is going to be like. Jesus never promised that you were going to find lasting joy here in this life or even that you're supposed to find it here. In fact, He said just

the opposite. “I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows....” (John 16:33 NLT)

There is an experience of eternal joy that awaits every child of God. The Bible refers to it without really explaining it. It’s there waiting for you and me. It’s real – far more real than anything here on Earth. I love what the Bible says about this future joy: “...God’s home is now with his people. He will live with them, and they will be his own. Yes, God will make his home among his people. He will wipe all tears from their eyes, and there will be no more death, suffering, crying, or pain. These things of the past are gone forever.” (Rev. 21:3-4 CEV) This life is not all there is. Christmas is the yearly reminder that because of what God did in the past, the very best is yet to come. Eternal, impossible-to-describe, never-to-be-taken-away joy is coming for each of us who belong to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Stella was struggling. It was her first Christmas alone. Her husband had died of cancer a few months earlier. Now, just a few days before Christmas Day, she was snowed in at home. Alone and discouraged, she decided against putting up any decorations. Late that afternoon, the doorbell rang. A young delivery man was at the door with a box. Stella signed the paper and asked, “What’s in the box?” The man laughed and opened the lid. Inside was a puppy – a golden Labrador Retriever. He picked up the squirming puppy and said, “This is for you, Ma’am. He’s six weeks old and completely housebroken.” The puppy began to wiggle in happiness at being released from captivity. “Who sent this?” Stella wondered. The man handed her an envelope, “It’s all explained here in this envelope. The dog was bought last July while its mother was still pregnant. It was meant to be a Christmas gift for you.” He handed her a book entitled, *How To Care For Your Labrador Retriever*. In desperation, Stella asked again, “But who sent me a puppy?” As the delivery man turned to leave, he said, “Your husband, Ma’am. Merry Christmas.”

She opened up the letter from her husband. He had written it three weeks before he died leaving it with the kennel owners to be delivered with the puppy as his last Christmas gift to her. The letter was full of loving and encouraging words. He was already looking forward to the day that she would join him in Heaven. He explained that he had sent her the gift of this puppy to keep her company until then. Stella wiped away tears. She put the letter down and – remembering the puppy at her feet – she picked up that golden furry ball and held it close. She looked out and saw Christmas lights outlining her neighbor’s home. She heard the carol, “Joy to the world, the Lord has come” playing on her radio. Suddenly Stella felt the most amazing sensation of peace wash over her. Her heart was filled with a joy that was greater than her grief. She looked at the little dog and said to him, “Little fella, it’s just you and me. But you know what? There’s a box down in the basement I’ll bet you’d like. It’s got a little Christmas tree in it and some lights and decorations that are going to impress you. Let’s go get it.”

Like Stella, your life might well be touched by sadness and uncertainty this year. My friend, Christmas is the yearly reminder that the very best is yet to come. Good will overcome evil. Life is stronger than death. Light is more powerful than darkness. God will defeat Satan. And because of that certain hope – the hope of eternal joy in God's presence – this really is a wonderful life!