

The Right Place at the Right Time



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Many of us at one time or another may have wondered about key decisions we have made in our lives. The kind of decisions that have had a profound effect on the direction of our lives. What if we had turned to the left instead of right on that mountain path? What if we had moved from home for a job or school across the country instead of remaining in place? What if we had made different choices from the ones we made? How would have things turned out?

The 1943 short story, *The Greatest Gift* by Philip Van Doren Stern, is loosely based on *A Christmas Carol*, written by Charles Dickens one hundred years earlier in 1843. These stories were the inspiration for Frank Capra's 1946 film *It's a Wonderful Life*, which is considered one of the best movies ever made and usually appears on American television networks during the Christmas season. The common theme in these stories and film is that of a man in crisis experiencing a supernatural visitation that reforms his thinking and transforms for good his life and those around him.

The protagonist of *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey, ran the family business, Bailey Brothers Building and Loan in Bedford Falls, New York. This bank had been at the center of his life from time his father managed it up to the time he inherited it. George also saw the bank as both a heavy ball

and chain keeping him from leaving town and pursuing his dreams, but also as a bulwark against Mr. Potter, the wealthiest and greediest man who controlled most of the town and who desired to take over or destroy the Building and Loan.

Disaster struck on Christmas Eve when a large sum of money that was to be deposited in the Building and Loan account went missing. The bank examiner was in town to review the bank's records that day and found the discrepancy. Unable to locate the missing money, George realized that scandal and prison awaited him. With no help in sight, in despair he made his way to the town bridge to end his life.

Before George could jump off the bridge, another man suddenly appeared and jumped into the cold, swirling water. George, being a good and decent man, went after him and rescued him. Warming up in the bridge watch house, the man revealed himself as Clarence, George's guardian angel. He told George that he was sent to save his life. George expressed his wish that he had never been born.

Granting his wish, Clarence revealed to George how things would be if he never existed. Without his management of the Building and Loan, it failed and his Uncle Billy who ran it suffered a nervous breakdown and was sent to a mental institution. Mr. Potter was able to take total control of Bedford Falls, which he renamed Pottersville, turning it into seedy, sleazy, crime-ridden town full of unfriendly people. Bailey Park, instead of being a working-class neighborhood of nice, comfortable homes was now a cemetery where his brother Harry was buried. George saved his brother from drowning when they were children, but since George was not there, Harry drowned. And all the people Harry later saved in World War II died because Harry was not there. His employer as a young boy, Mr. Gower, was sent to prison for manslaughter since George was not there to catch the deadly error he made in a drug prescription. His wife Mary never married, and the children she and George would have had did not exist since George was

not born.

George pleaded with Clarence to allow him to return to his life. His wish was granted, and a grateful George rushed home to face arrest. But when he arrived, he found out that his wife Mary and Uncle Billy rallied the townspeople, who remembered the kindness and generosity George showed to them throughout his life. They donated far more than was needed to cover the missing money, causing the officer sent for him to smile and tear up the arrest warrant. George was at the right place at the right time in all the lives he touched, and in turn many of those people were at the right place at the right time for George. As everyone in George's home celebrated and sang "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing", he realized how rich and wonderful his life was.

What if God, in His perfect righteousness, decided before the foundation of the world not to send His Son Jesus to save humanity fallen into sin? What if there was no promise to Adam and Eve that a Savior would be sent to crush the devil and secure atonement for all our sins (Genesis 3:15; Hebrews 2:17; 1 John 4:10)? We would all be in a great deal of trouble! We would all face the hell of being forever separated from God's presence and the glory of His power (2 Thessalonians 2:5-10), forever ruined beyond repair and unable to fulfill our highest purpose – that is, to glorify God and forever enjoy Him.

Praise and thanks be to God that He established a different "timeline". Out of His perfect righteousness and love for us, and perfect timing, He sent His Son Jesus.

"But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons." (Galatians 4:4-5)

When Jesus came the Roman Empire stretched over most of the civilized world. Travel and commerce had reached an

unprecedented level due in great part to the network of roads that connected the diverse regions of the empire. The Greek language was commonly used throughout the empire much like English is spoken in many places around the world today. All this provided the perfect setting for the propagation of the gospel message.

The world would hear the message that we are not here by random chance, and that we were not designed to be fragile, to break down and die. A loving God created us in His image to last forever, body and spirit, so that we would always enjoy fellowship with Him. But Adam's sin ruined this and brought suffering and death on humanity. God through His Son Jesus Christ entered time and came into this wrecked world.

"By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." (1 John 4:9-10)

His perfect life, death on the cross for our sins, and resurrection broke the power of death over all who trust in Him. Though like grass our bodies wither and fade away (Isaiah 40:6-8), the Lord's promise is to resurrect us, reunite body and spirit, and restore forever the fellowship with God that was lost. Jesus came to give us a wonderful life, an abundant life, eternal life (John 10:10).

In Peter Jackson's 2001 movie adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, Frodo and his companions had to take the dangerous path through Mount Moria on the quest to destroy the evil Ring of Power, earnestly sought by the Dark Lord Sauron to dominate all life on Middle-earth. Gollum, a wretched and pitiful creature whose mind and body had become twisted by long possession of the ring, was irresistibly drawn to it. He stealthily followed Frodo into the dark mountain to reclaim it, but Frodo was

alerted to his presence and told Gandalf:

Frodo: There's something down there!

Gandalf: It's Gollum.

Frodo: Gollum!

Gandalf: He has been following us for three days.

Frodo: He escaped the dungeons of Barad-dur.

Gandalf: Escaped or set loose. He hates and loves the ring, as he hates and loves himself. He will never be rid of his need for it.

Frodo: It's a pity Bilbo didn't kill him when he had the chance.

Gandalf: Pity? It was pity that stayed Bilbo's hand. Many that live deserve death. Some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them, Frodo? Do not be too eager to deal out death in judgment. Even the very wise cannot see all ends. My heart tells me that Gollum has some part to play yet, for good or ill before this is over. The pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many.

Frodo: I wish the Ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened.

Gandalf: So do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us. There are other forces at work in this world, Frodo, besides the will of evil. Bilbo was meant to find the ring; in which case you also were meant to have it. And that is an encouraging thought.

It turned out later in this epic story that when Frodo was to destroy the ring by throwing it into the lava depths within Mount Doom, the power of the ring overcame his resolve and he

decided to keep it for himself. The quest would have failed there, except that Gollum had followed Frodo into the mountain. He attacked him and managed to take the ring. But in his joy at recovering it, he fell over a ledge above the cauldron of lava. Frodo was left holding on to the ledge for dear life. The ring along with Gollum was destroyed, and the quest successful. The evil kingdom of Sauron was destroyed.

If Bilbo had not pitied Gollum and killed him when he had the chance many years before, Frodo's failure to destroy the ring would have doomed Middle-earth to perpetual darkness.

Because Frodo's friend and travel companion Sam was with him, he was able to pull him from the ledge when he tumbled over with Gollum and save his life.

As Sauron's kingdom crumbled to ruin, the lava in Mount Doom erupted and began to flow down the mountain. Frodo and Sam were trapped on a boulder with lava flowing around them. Because the eagles were flying overhead beholding the fall of Sauron, their sharp eyes saw Frodo and Sam and they were able to rescue them from certain death and carry them to a place of safety.

God's providence in the story worked out events so that Frodo, Sam, Gollum, and others were able to play their vital roles in destroying the ring and bringing peace to Middle-earth. Everyone was at the right place at the right time.

Like Frodo, we may question why we are where we are in the world at this particular time and wish we did not face the present perilous circumstances. Some of us, like George Bailey, may wish we did not live in the present time. But it is important to remember that our lives and its events are not by random chance. God did not place us here a thousand years ago, or one hundred years ago, but today. He has a purpose for each of us being here and now.

One of the many examples of this in Scripture is the story of

Joseph, the favored son of Jacob who was sold as a slave to a caravan of traders by his own brothers who were intensely jealous of him. His brothers then deceived their father Jacob by telling him that Joseph was dead. Joseph was taken to Egypt, where he experienced betrayal, imprisonment, and disappointment. Yet he trusted in God's ability to work everything out according to His righteousness. God gifted Joseph with administrative genius and the ability to interpret dreams. The Pharaoh of Egypt elevated him to be Governor over the entire country to prepare for a coming great famine, which enabled him to save the country and that region of the world that depended on Egypt for food, and especially preserve the lives of his brothers and their families. God made Joseph to be in the right place at the right time to save the people of Israel, which in turn led to the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus who provides the ultimate salvation for humanity.

"When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, 'What if Joseph bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong which we did to him!' So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, 'Your father charged before he died, saying, Thus you shall say to Joseph, Please forgive, I beg you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, for they did you wrong. And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.' And Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also came and fell down before him and said, 'Behold, we are your servants.' **But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.** So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.' So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them." (Genesis 50:15-21)

Another example is the story of Esther, a young woman of the Jewish exiles in Persia. Through a series of providential

circumstances, she rose to become queen with King Ahasuerus. Though not explicitly stated in the account, it was clear that God arranged for Esther to be at that place at that time to play a crucial role in saving her people from annihilation. Her cousin Mordecai alluded to this in his response to her at a critical point of the story.

“Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, ‘Do not imagine that you in the king’s palace can escape any more than all the Jews. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father’s house will perish. **And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?’**” (Esther 4:13-14)

The apostle Paul proclaimed to the Athenians at Mars Hill a God intimately involved in human affairs. This sovereign God created all things, gives life and breath to all things, and sustains all things. He “made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation” (Acts 17:26).

God knew us completely before we were born. As a Master Architect, He lovingly and skillfully oversaw our construction in our mother’s womb and ordained all our days before they existed.

“For You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother’s womb. I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; wonderful are Your works, and my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from You, When I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth; Your eyes have seen my unformed substance; and **in Your book were all written the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them.**” (Psalm 139:13-16)

Although we do not know how our lives will turn out God

certainly does, and that is a comforting and encouraging thought. It shows the intimate care He has for us. We may often not understand why we went through certain circumstances or experiences, but God used them and those with whom we interacted to bring us in His perfect time to faith in Jesus Christ and to enable us to persevere through the times we face in the world today.

But our unique experiences do not to benefit us alone, for they allow us to share the love and grace of God, especially in the gospel, with those we encounter in ways that are particularly fitting for the person and time.

“And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

Just as Jesus came into the world at the right place at the right time to save sinners doomed to eternal separation from God, so He has placed us here at the right place at the right time to work out all our circumstances for our good, for our salvation, for the blessing of others with whom we travel on the road of life, and for His glory.

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