



SERMON RECAP

AUGUST 30, 2026

The Prophet of Grace: the anti-prophet Javert from “Les Miserables” Isaiah 40:1-11

Victor Hugo was already a famous author when he penned *Les Miserables* in 1862. He was a French Romantacist made famous by successful plays and the enormously popular *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1831), we will cover that source material in the finale of the Broadway series. He wrote *Les Miserables* while in self-imposed exile during Napoleon III's reign. He was a passionate supporter of republicanism and wrote *Les Miserables* as a harsh criticism of the entrenched social order of French culture and the systemic injustices that kept people trapped in cycles of poverty.

There are many intertwined aspects of the story that includes unrequited love, a student uprising, the loss of innocence, mistaken identity, and a couple of ne'er-do-wells who run an inn. The thread that is interwoven in it all is the relationship between Inspector Javert and Jean Valjean. Valjean is a convict who first stole some bread to feed his sister's children.

Valjean's journey to becoming a reputable member of society is long and winding. It is largely made possible by an incredible act of grace and generosity by a kindly Priest. His reputation and success is precariously built on a lie. He is actually a fugitive of the law, having skipped his parole and changed his identity. Inspector Javert pursues him, “I've hunted you across the years...” he sings in the incredible duet “The Confrontation.” Javert does not see the new man Valjean became. All he can see is 24601, and declares “men like you can never change.”

In the story Javert is the anti-hero. He is not an evil man, he just cannot comprehend the concept of grace. As he sings, “I was born inside a jail. I was born with scum like you.” He only sees 24601's crimes. When he sings “Stars,” he explains that it is his Godly duty to pursue criminals for the safety of all people.

When Javert is given the same grace he is never able to extend however, his world crumbles. In a power scene, Valjean is given Javert as a prisoner (of the student uprising). Now with the roles reverse, Valjean does not pursue revenge. Instead he releases Javert.



Les Miserables was written by Victor Hugo in 1862. It was adapted to a musical in 1980 by Schonberg and Boublil, and debuted on Broadway in 1987. Produced by Cameron Mackintosh, it went on to win 8 Tony awards, including Best Musical. In 2012 it was turned into a film and Ann Hathaway won an Oscar for Best Actor.

“Comfort” is the first word of second Isaiah (40:1). The time of exile has come to an end. The time of correction has passed. The people have suffered a terrible loss, but now God declares that there will be renewal. The exile is over. The anger has passed. God's word for the people is now Grace.

Enraged by the wickedness of those who would not enact justice, who would trample the poor, exploit the weak, and not care for the widow, the orphan, or the immigrant, God allowed Babylon to send Israel into exile. That time is no more. The book of Second Isaiah declares that the exile is over. Comfort is now the word of God. Compassion is forever.

Javert could not understand compassion, and in the end it was his doom. Javert could not understand compassion, but this does not mean that Valjean was without justice. He understood justice perfectly well. When he was confronted with the wrong he committed and the suffering he caused (in Fantine's life), he did everything he could to make it right.

His love for young Cossette was true and pure, and it was born out of his own sense of justice. Valjean was able to grasp both justice and compassion. They are two sides of the same coin that is God's love. Justice without compassion is tyranny. Compassion without justice is cheap grace.

The first words of Second Isaiah tell us that “The Lord's glory will appear, and all humanity will see it together.” Seeing God's glory is something Javert could never do. He could not see Valjean's humanity. All he could see was a number.

The last words of the musical are “To love another person is to see the face of God.” We see the face of God, or as Isaiah puts it “the Lord's glory,” when we love someone else. When we offer justice and compassion. When we offer grace and generosity. When we are made vulnerable to suffering so that someone else may find joy. This is love. This is how we see God's glory.

NEXT WEEK:

The Prophet of Inclusion: Anybodies from “West Side Story”