
The Ghosts of Christmas

AN ADVENT MESSAGE SERIES
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Marley's Ghost



In England at the turn of the nineteenth century, Christmas had almost vanished from the scene. In part, the continued influence of conservative Reformed Christians, who believed that people should do only what the Bible commands and therefore should not celebrate Christmas, especially given its popular excesses, meant that for many in England Christmas was not a valid holiday. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the festive gatherings were much different from those we associate with this time of year. They were rather

like the worst of office parties, rife with drunkenness and sexual license, combined with the hooliganism we see in some extreme celebrations of Halloween. Even many Anglicans were outraged by what they saw. The Reverend Henry Bourne of Newcastle lamented that Christmas was “*a pretense for Drunkenness, and Rioting, and Wantonness.*”

Furthermore, the disappearance of Christmas from English culture had much more to do with the social impact of industrialization and urbanization. As large numbers of people left their ancestral villages to move to the large cities, they also left behind most of their cultural traditions, such as the celebration of Christmas. Moreover, in the cities, bosses weren’t inclined to encourage a holiday that meant a day off from work, especially a day of paid vacation.

Another implication of big city life in Victorian England was widespread poverty and human suffering. Although many people worked in factories and offices, wages were low and living conditions poor. This was an abiding concern for Charles Dickens, especially in the fall of 1843.

Amid his busy writing career, he was working hard to raise support for institutions that educated and otherwise helped the urban poor of England. In October 1843, a trip to Manchester poured fuel on the flame of Dickens’s passion for the poor. As he spoke at the Athenaeum, an institution devoted to caring for the poor in Manchester, Dickens’s heart was strangely moved. Moreover, he had stayed with his beloved sister Fan (the name of Ebenezer Scrooge’s dear sister in A Christmas Carol), who had two young sons, one of whom was frail and sick (not unlike Tiny Tim). So in October, Dickens began to write A Christmas Carol. According to his own testimony, his writing of this short book was rather a spiritual experience.

A Christmas Carol was published on December 19, 1843. Dickens’ contributions to our celebration of Christmas include:

- Christmas as a major holiday. At the time of Dickens, it was relatively ignored by most people.
- Christmas as a one (or two) day celebration rather than the traditional twelve.

- Christmas as an occasion for family and close friends to gather for luscious food, singing, dancing, and games. Before A Christmas Carol, turkey was uncommon on Christmas tables. After the book, it became the meat of choice for this holiday.
- Christmas as a time for being generous to the poor.

Dickens did not so much invent these traditions as he resurrected them and popularized them. Much of what we assume to be true of Christmas celebrations today derives from the vision of Dickens, especially as portrayed in A Christmas Carol. So close was the connection between Charles Dickens and Christmas that when he died in 1870, a young woman who heard of it was aghast, “*Dickens dead!*” she exclaimed. “*Then will Father Christmas die too?*”

But Dickens' A Christmas Carol goes much deeper. It does not simply address Christmas traditions and caring for the poor, but dives into sin and redemption.

Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it: and Scrooge's name was good upon 'Change, for anything he chose to put his hand to. Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail.

Mind! I don't mean to say that I know, of my own knowledge, what there is particularly dead about a door-nail. I might have been inclined, myself, to regard a coffin-nail as the deadest piece of ironmongery in the trade. But the wisdom of our ancestors is in the simile; and my unhallowed hands shall not disturb it, or the country is done for. You will therefore permit me to repeat, emphatically, that Marley was as dead as a door-nail.

Thus, the story A Christmas Carol begins. Jacob Marley is dead. And then we are introduced to Scrooge.

Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge. a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly

in his grating voice. A frosty rime was on his head, and on his eyebrows, and his wiry chin. He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dog-days; and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas.

Scrooge is a man so lost, so selfish, so focused on money, when asked to help the poor, his response is that they should go to the poor houses and the prisons. When told that many would rather die than go there, Scrooge responds, "*they had better do it and decrease the surplus population.*"

And when it comes to Christmas, Scrooge's response is the response of a man most miserable. He cries, "*Merry Christmas! Out upon merry Christmas! What's Christmas time to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, but not an hour richer; a time for balancing your books and having every item in 'em through a round dozen of months presented dead against you? If I could work my will every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips, should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart. He should!*"

The real problem is that Scrooge does not recognize his state, how miserable he is, his need for salvation. He is like so many today who go about their tasks, having never looked deeply into a mirror. If they were to sing John Newton's famous hymn, they would simply sing, "*I once was blind...*"

But then a ghost helps him see...

When the ghost of Jacob Marley visits Scrooge, at first he doubts what he sees. Scrooge argues that his vision is probably "*an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!*" Yet with loud cries and a horrifying change of appearance, Marley's ghost prevails upon Scrooge's good sense. He finally believes that the ghost is real.

Scrooge's first response to this recognition is fear and trembling. His fear grows when he learns that he is destined to wear even heavier post-mortem chains than the ones that Marley himself is forced to carry. "*Speak comfort to me, Jacob,*" Scrooge begs, in his first real demonstration of some sort of human vulnerability. Yet Marley can offer no real comfort.

As Marley continues, he explains that he has come to warn Scrooge so that he might escape Marley's dire fate. To this Scrooge responds, "*You were always a good friend to me, . . . Thank'ee.*" Here is the first bit of tenderheartedness directed by Scrooge to someone other than himself. He feels gratitude to Marley. It is here we first see the frosty heart of Ebenezer Scrooge begin to thaw.

Before Scrooge is visited by Jacob Marley, he shows not the slightest bit of kindness or tenderness. His heart is hard. His focus is utterly self-centered. He has nothing to offer others but scorn and an occasional "*Bah, Humbug!*" Scrooge now shows the tiniest morsel of positive feeling to anyone.

It's Marley's gift of undeserved kindness that first touches Scrooge's soul. Marley extended grace to his former partner. In no way did Marley owe Scrooge anything. And there's no reason to believe that Marley stood to gain anything for himself in helping Scrooge. Moreover, in no way whatsoever had Scrooge done anything to deserve Marley's help. Marley's intervention was simply an act of grace.

It is this act of grace that not only begins to soften Scrooge's heart so he can hear the message the other spirits will share with him, but it is this act of grace that helps Scrooge to discover a truth so important that there can be no salvation without it...that he is a sinner.

This is what the nation of Israel has recognized in our scripture this morning.

*For all of us have become like one who is unclean,
And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment;
And all of us wither like a leaf,
And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
There is no one who calls on Your name,
Who arouses himself to take hold of You;
For You have hidden Your face from us
And have delivered us into the power of our iniquities.*

-Isaiah 64:6-7

The prophet Isaiah speaks for God and for the nation of Israel. The nation of Israel, all of us, because of our sin, are not only obnoxious to God's justice, but odious to his holiness. Isaiah takes it further stating that all our righteousnesses, or justifications, are as filthy rags. These are rags, which not only cannot cover us, but filthy rags which also defile us. The prophet understands that even our best works and actions have so great an alloy of imperfection that they cannot justify us before a holy and just God. A wind that withers both leaves and fruit, or that sweeps away all before it has taken the Israelites (and us) away. In the case of the nation of Israel, this wind (sin) has not only scattered them geographically, but has scattered them from God's favor into a state of condemnation and wrath.

Centuries later, Paul would reiterate Isaiah's words making sure we understood they applied to all of us, "*All fall short of the glory of God.*"

Ask people what they must do to get to heaven and most reply, "*Be good.*" Jesus' stories and teachings contradict that answer. Like Peter, sinking beneath the waves, we must simply lift up our hand to Christ and cry out, "*Help!*" Perhaps this is like after being told that his chain forged "*link by link, and yard by yard...girded [by his] own free will...was as heavy and as long as [Marley's], seven Christmas Eves ago...It is a ponderous chain,*"...Scrooge cries out to Marley's ghost, "*Speak comfort to me, Jacob.*"

In order to cry for "*Help,*" we must first have our eyes open, like Scrooge, to our own sinful state, that we all fall short, all of us. There is not a day goes by that I do not experience pride, or selfishness, or greed. The Bible tells me that these sins push me away from God. Nothing I can do will make up for my sins; they are too many. If I could make up for them by serving in the church, reading the Bible, giving to charity, being a good neighbor, the whole time I was making up for my past sins against God I would be committing new sins. It would be an endless cycle, one which I could never win.

Once our eyes are open to the sin in our lives we must recognize grace or we might fall into a pit of despair. Marley offers this to Scrooge, "*I am here tonight to warn you that you have yet a chance and hope of escaping my fate.*" This is grace. This is mercy. It is offered to us not by a ghost but by a merciful and loving God and by His Son, Jesus Christ.

For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.”

-Romans 5:6-9

In our passage today, Isaiah understands that Israel has sinned, but God can bring them back. God can restore them. The prophet cries out to God on behalf of Israel.

*But now, O Lord, You are our Father,
We are the clay, and You our potter;
And all of us are the work of Your hand.
Do not be angry beyond measure, O Lord,
Nor remember iniquity forever;
Behold, look now, all of us are Your people.*

-Isaiah 64:8-9

And God speaks through the prophet Isaiah that He will intervene. He will bring Israel back. He will restore, redeem them. He will send a Savior. He will show grace to His people.

*Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him;
He will bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not grow faint or be discouraged
till he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his law."
Thus says God, the Lord,*

*who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
Who gives breath to the people on it
and spirit to those who walk in it:
"I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness;
I will take you by the hand and keep you;
I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations..."*

-Isaiah 42:1-6

Marley's ghost tells Scrooge that he will "*be haunted by Three Spirits*" and that in their coming Scrooge might escape his chains.

God tells Israel that a Savior will be coming, a "*light for the nations*," one whom God has "*put [His] spirit upon Him*," one who will "*bring forth justice to the nations*," and in His coming the people might escape their chains. We might escape our chains. "*Might*" because it is our choice...our choice to cry out for "*mercy*," "*for comfort*." As Paul tells us, "*Everyone who calls [makes a choice] on the name of the Lord will be saved*."

The season of Advent, meaning "*arrival*" or "*coming*," is the time we remember Israel crying out, searching for, waiting for the coming of a Savior. We hear the prophets announcing that one day, yes, one day, God will send a Savior, a Messiah.

You and I know that Messiah has come. Jesus, whose birth we celebrate at the culmination of Advent on Christmas Eve, is the Messiah. Advent is for us, not only a remembering, remembering the Israelites, the prophets, the hope of a Savior, but for us lighting the candle on the Advent wreath is looking toward the second Advent, Christ's return. Rev. Laurence Hull Stookey tells us, "*Advent is the celebration of the promise that Christ will bring an end to all that is contrary to the ways of God; the resurrection of Jesus is the first sign of this destruction of the powers of death, the inauguration and anticipation of what is yet to come in fullness*."

Advent is a time to prepare our hearts to meet Him, to stand before Jesus, and to recognize our need for a Savior. It is our time to recognize our sin our need for help, and to cry out like Scrooge, "*Mercy*."

Advent is a time in recognizing the chains we have constructed, to turn our hearts from the behaviors behind those chains, to make, as Marley's ghost points out to Scrooge, "*mankind [our] business...the common welfare [our] business; charity, mercy, forbearance and benevolence...[our] business.*" In other words, to take on the "*fruits of the spirit*" - "*...love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*" It is a time to not be a Scrooge, for as Paul writes in Romans 13:11, "*Another reason for right living is that you know how late it is; time is running out. Wake up, for the coming of our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.*"

Let us allow the ghosts of Christmas, the spirit of Christmas, the Holy Spirit, help us build something new with our lives, something that shows others grace and points them to the Savior. Let us hear the voice of John the Baptist crying in the wilderness, "*Prepare the way of the Lord,*" preparing our hearts to receive Him. Let us prepare to receive, not a babe born in a manger, but a Christ, a Messiah, as described in I Thessalonians 4:16, "*For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God.*" Let us prepare as if we received a letter that reads,

"Expect my Son December 25. Will not come in a crib, but trailing clouds of glory. This is the end. Repeat: This is the end. Prepare for his arrival. It'll be sheep at his right hand, goats at his left. No regrets accepted. Signed, Father."

As Walter Burghardt writes, "[If I received such a letter] *I suspect my Advent would be different.*"

This Christmas, may we recognize that we too are sinners. We too have fallen short of the glory of God. Let us understand this without needing a ghost to visit us, to tell us of our chains. Let us look in the mirror and see what we have forged that is not of God and let us cry out for mercy, for forgiveness, for grace.

Jacob Marley is "*as dead as a doornail,*" but our God is not. Our Savior was not buried with "*a stake of holly through his heart,*" but died with nails through his hands and rose again with lightening and earthquake. Not because of a ghost but because of our Savior, like Scrooge, we have been given a chance to escape the

chains we have forged in this life. Let us never find ourselves saying "*Humbug*" to such a gift.



The Ghost of Christmas Past



The main character in Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol is Ebenezer Scrooge. Scrooge is described as "*...a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone...a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner!*" Scrooge is visited by the ghost of his former partner, Jacob Marley who tells him that he will be visited by three spirits, three spirits whom without Scrooge would wind up walking the same path as Marley for all eternity, shackled by an even larger chain of his own making.

The first chapter of Dickens' tale ends, *"Scrooge closed the window, and examined the door by which the Ghost had entered. It was double-locked, as he had locked it with his own hands, and the bolts were undisturbed. He tried to say 'Humbug!' But stopped at the first syllable. And being, from the emotion he had undergone, or the fatigues of the day, or the glimpse of the Invisible World, or the dull conversation of the Ghost, or the lateness of the hour, much in need of repose; went straight to bed, without undressing, and fell asleep upon the instant."*

And then...

At the sounding of the clock striking one, *"light flashed up in the room upon the instant, and the curtains of his bed were drawn."*

Before Scrooge was *"a strange figure - like a child: yet not so like a child as like an old man, viewed through some supernatural medium, which gave him the appearance of having receded from the view, and being diminished to a child's proportions. Its hair, which hung about its neck and down its back was white as if with age; and yet the face had not a wrinkle in it, and the tenderest bloom was on the skin."*

Scrooge asked, *"Are you the Spirit, sir, whose coming was foretold to me?"* "I am," replied the Spirit.

Scrooge then asked why the Spirit was there. The Spirit replies, *"Your welfare... Your reclamation... Take heed!"*

I had to look up that word *"Reclamation"* since many of the film versions change this word to *"redemption."* Reclamation means *"returning something to its former or better state."* Reclaiming.

Isn't that the message we find throughout the scriptures as humankind falls prey to temptation?

- Sin enters the world and we are cast from the garden which holds the tree of life.
- God then begins to set in motion a plan, which includes the birthing of a nation, Israel. God calls a people to get to know Him, to understand that God is holy and they, we, are not, to understand their need for a Savior.

- God prepares the people for this Savior through God's law, through sacrificial worship, and through the prophets.
- And then God births a Savior, Jesus, who dies a sacrificial death and rises again.
- The scriptures end with Christ's triumphant return and God's gathering His people to the Holy City, where we are told that in the center of that city, "*on each side of the river, [stands] the tree of life.*"

Someone once said that the Bible was a tale between two trees. It is the story of our fall from the garden, from intimacy with our Creator, and God's plan of reclamation, working to get us back to the garden, back to Him.

A Christmas Carol is that same story. In this case, the Spirits, working for the reclamation of Ebenezer Scrooge. The Spirits working to get him back to a former and better state, a state where his sin, his chain, is broken, and his heart is not cold and unfeeling, but filled with joy, generosity, and love, filled with the things of God.

The Ghost of Christmas Past takes Scrooge on an amazing journey into his past helping him remember the last time he felt such a thing as joy, the last time he witnessed and benefited from another's generosity, the last time his heart loved.

He sees the loneliness of his childhood as well as the joy when his sister, Fan, comes to take him home. Scrooge witnesses once more the generosity of his old employer, Fezziwig, and then comes face to face with the woman, Belle, who he loved but replaced with his love for money. The ghost shows him what he could have had, a family and children, if only he had not been filled with greed, if only his heart had not been hardened. Scrooge cries out to the Spirit, "*Remove me! I cannot bear it! Haunt me no longer!*"

Scrooge weeps with regret when he realizes how his greed has ruined his relationships, when he realizes the joy he has missed, the generosity he could have easily offered, and the love he could have had. Perhaps Scrooge could have related well to the Christian rock band Reliant K's song entitled, "*Who I Am Hates Who I've Been.*"

In Matthew 3:1-12, we read about John the Baptist.

*Now in those days John the Baptist came,
preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying,
“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”
For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he said,
“The voice of one crying in the wilderness,
‘Make ready the way of the Lord,
Make His paths straight!’”*

*Now John himself had garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist;
and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and
all Judea and all the district around the Jordan; and they were being baptized by him
in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins.*

John the Baptist calls on the people to repent. Repentance is turning away from sin and turning toward a fruitful life. It can be defined as "*a fundamental turnaround involving mind and action and including overtones of grief, which results in fruit in keeping with repentance.*" Repentance involves turning around, a new direction, a change of heart, a new commitment.

Often we are tempted to call sin by other names and to blame other people for our problems rather than accepting responsibility for our sins. Such an attitude denies the reality of sin and thus offers no escape from it. This is how Adam and Eve responded when they sinned. In Genesis 3:13, Eve responds to God, "*The serpent deceived me, and I ate.*"

Other times we are tempted to bury our sins, bury the past. This is what Scrooge had done. It takes the Ghost of Christmas Past for Scrooge to face once more his sins and the pain they caused. Burying our sin denies the fact that our past is part of who we are, that our past does not go away. We have to bring it to God so He can heal us. We have to allow God to use our past and our hurts for His purposes. Proverbs 28:13: "*He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.*"

Lastly, there are times we beat ourselves up for the mistakes, the sins of our past. We live our lives reliving over and over those moments we failed God. We feel like the psalmist who cries out, "*I am drowning in the flood of my sins, they are a burden too heavy to bear. Because I have been foolish, I'm utterly worn out and crushed, my heart is troubled*" (Psalm 38:4-8).

John the Baptist invites the people, invites you and I, to not blame others, bury our sins, or beat ourselves up over the past, but to make a radical break from our sinful past and to turn afresh to God. "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*"

The Ghost of Christmas Past, the Holy Spirit, has certainly visited me on many occasions and shown me moments when sin took hold of me, carried me far from God. The Spirit has shown me moments I cannot blame others for or bury deep within my self, moments I must not beat myself up for, but instead must allow God to use.

I have always been forthcoming with my past, fathering a baby at the age of sixteen, hurting my parents, even a night in jail.

- Moments I chose self over God, brought to the surface by the Holy Spirit, just as Scrooge's past was brought to the surface by a Ghost.
- Moments I lifted up to God, crying out for His forgiveness, and in His mercy I experienced His grace anew.
- Moments God has used to make me into His vessel, teaching me compassion, empathy, mercy, patience, and love so that I might witness and connect to others, that I might not judge, leading them to the One who saved me.

Think of a car. We can see what is behind us by using the rear view mirror. The rear view mirror is very small compared to the windshield which allows us to see ahead, to where we are going. Every now and then we need to look back to see where we have come from, what God has brought us through, but our focus must be forward, looking ahead to what God has for us, to how we can serve Him and make a difference in this world.

Paul wrote, *"...but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 3:13-14).

The Ghost of Christmas Past showed Scrooge the rear view, but only for a moment. Its purpose was not to hold him there in a storm of emotions and regret, but to prepare Him, to prepare His heart, for what was ahead.

We Are Not Who We Were.

We can choose to allow the mistakes we have made define us. We can choose to believe we can't change, our tomorrows will be no different from our todays, our yesterdays. Or we can have hope.

- Hope that God can work through our past to redefine our present and open up our future.
- Hope that we are not limited to either staying the same or running from the past.
- Hope that God presents another option, to help us claim who we were as a part of becoming who God wants us to be.

Yes, you and I have made mistakes, and those mistakes are a part of our story, but they don't have to be the whole story. We can reframe our past regrets as a small part of a larger story of forgiveness and growth. 2 Corinthians 5:17 states, *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"*

Scrooge let himself be defined by his past, but that's only one part of his story. The Ghost of Christmas Past reminds Scrooge of the pain his actions caused both him and others, reminds him of what he had missed as a way of setting the stage for him to look forward. As one author writes, *"For us, the birth of the Christ child brings the hope that our past doesn't have to be our present, and that our future is pregnant with the possibilities God has for us."*

I read a story about a pastor named A.J. Gordon:

While he was pastor of a church in Boston, he met a young boy in front of the sanctuary carrying a rusty cage in which several birds fluttered nervously.

Gordon inquired, "Son, where did you get those birds?"

The boy replied, "I trapped them out in the field."

"What are you going to do with them?"

"I'm going to play with them, and then I guess I'll just feed them to an old cat we have at home."

When Gordon offered to buy them, the lad exclaimed, "Mister, you don't want them, they're just little old wild birds and can't sing very well."

Gordon replied, "I'll give you \$2 for the cage and the birds."

"Okay, it's a deal, but you're making a bad bargain."

The exchange was made and the boy went away whistling, happy with his shiny coins. Gordon walked around to the back of the church property, opened the door of the small wire coop, and let the struggling creatures soar into the blue.

This is what God has done for us. I Peter 1:18-19 states, *"For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed...but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect."* God has bought us with the blood of His Son, Jesus Christ in order that we might be freed from a past that holds us captive and might fly into a bright and glorious future.

The story of Ebenezer Scrooge is our own. This Advent season, the Ghost of Christmas Past comes to visit us, asking us to look back through time to what we have blamed others for, to what we have buried, to what we continue to beat ourselves up with, and embrace it. The Ghost of Christmas Past invites us to embrace the past and hand it over to God so that we might be healed, that we might be made new, redeemed. The Ghost of Christmas Past invites us to allow God to use our past to lead us and others into a glorious future.

Scrooge, talking to the ghost about his former employer, Fezziwig, says, *"He has the power to render us happy or unhappy; to make our service light or burdensome; a pleasure or a toil. Say that his power lies in words and looks; in things so slight and insignificant that it is impossible to add and count 'em up: what then? The happiness he gives is quite as great as if it cost a fortune."*

God wants us to understand that this describes all our futures. God wants us to understand that our futures have the power to render the world happy or unhappy, to make the service of those around us light or burdensome. A future that can give out happiness is worth more than any fortune, but the only way this future can be ours is if we are willing to lay our past, our lives, before God, and like Scrooge, exhausted from the experience, simply trust and wait for what God will do next.



The Ghost of Christmas Present



Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol tells the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, "*a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner*," who gets the chance, through the Spirits of Christmas Past, Present, and Future, to be redeemed, to have his hard heart softened and his eyes opened to the things of God.

The Ghost of Christmas Past took Scrooge on an amazing journey into his past helping him remember the last time he felt such a thing as joy, the last time he

witnessed and benefited from another's generosity, the last time his heart loved. The ghost showed him what he could have had, a family and children, if only he had not been filled with greed, if only his heart had not been hardened. Scrooge was never able to move past who he WAS to who he COULD BE. He allowed his past to define him.

After his journey with the Ghost of Christmas Past, Scrooge falls into a deep sleep and awakes to a ghostly light coming from under the door to the adjoining room. He softly shuffles to the door and when he places his hand upon the lock, a strange voice calls him by name and asks him to enter.

Scrooge enters a room that looks quite different then he remembered.

The walls and ceiling were so hung with living green, that it looked a perfect grove; from every part of which, bright gleaming berries glistened. The crisp leaves of holly, mistletoe, and ivy reflected back the light, as if so many little mirrors had been scattered there; and such a mighty blaze went roaring up the chimney, as that dull petrifaction of a hearth had never known in Scrooge's time, or Marley's, or for many and many a winter season gone. Heaped up on the floor, to form a kind of throne, were turkeys, geese, game, poultry, braten, great joints of meat, sucking-pigs, long wreaths of sausages, mince-pies, plum-puddings, barrels of oysters, red-hot chestnuts, cherry-cheeked apples, juicy oranges, luscious pears, immense twelfth-cakes, and seething bowls of punch, that made the chamber dim with their delicious steam. In easy state upon this couch, there sat a jolly Giant, glorious to see; who bore a glowing torch, in shape not unlike Plenty's horn, and held it up, high up, to shed its light on Scrooge, as he came peeping round the door. "Come in!" exclaimed the Ghost. "Come in, and know me better, man."

Scrooge is taken to his clerk's, Bob Cratchit's, house and sees their small home and their meager feast and witnesses the innocence and joy of Tiny Tim, Cratchit's crippled son. He learns that Tiny Tim will not live much longer.

Their next stop is the home of Fred, Scrooge's nephew. Scrooge turned down an invitation to dinner at Fred's house, so Scrooge sees the party he is going to miss. Dickens describes Scrooge as having become "so [jolly] and light of heart" that he did not want to leave and asks the Ghost to stay until the end of the festivities.

One of the most damning lines about Scrooge is in the 1984 movie adaptation, when the Ghost of Christmas Present says to Scrooge, *“You’ve gone through life not noticing a lot.”*

One of the biggest challenges to being faithful today is the constant presence of distraction. We are a distracted culture, our attention dissected 100 different ways, unable to prioritize what’s important because we’re told everything is important, which means nothing is important.

On Christmas Eve we hear the scriptures read, we hear the angels announce the birth of Christ to the shepherds, *“Do not be afraid; for see I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”* To you is born THIS day. Not tomorrow. Not yesterday. This day.

I wonder if you and I would respond with the same urgency as the shepherds. *“Today? Hmm. That’s really not good for me. I’ve got a 9 a.m. coffee, some Christmas shopping to do, I need to pick up my kid from school and run by the grocery. I’m free at 3 p.m. Wednesday. Can Jesus wait until then to be born? Do I have to see the Christ child NOW?”* The distractions of this season, the distractions of this life, keep us from being present to the miracles all around us every day.

When the Ghost of Christmas Present takes Scrooge out into the night, he takes him not only to Bob Cratchit's and to his nephew, Fred's, but the Ghost takes Scrooge across the land to the homes of miners who work in the depths of the earth, to two men who work a lighthouse set upon an island of rock surrounded by the ocean, to the crew of a ship out at sea. Place after place, Scrooge sees that regardless of their location, their situation, their lack of worldly things, men and women who grab joy in the moment, each celebrating this very special day of the year, Christmas.

Scrooge's eyes are opened to the fact that your surroundings, what you have, do not determine your ability to feel joy, peace, blessing. Your surroundings do not determine your ability to celebrate. Even in the most miserable of surroundings, of situations, one can see reason to give thanks. Scrooge's eyes are opened to the lesson Paul learned and taught others in Philippians 4:12. Paul writes, *“I know what*

it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want."

Scrooge's eyes are open to things he had never noticed before. Dickens describes what Scrooge sees.

The sky was gloomy, and the shortest streets were choked up with a dingy mist, half thawed, half frozen, whose heavier particles descended in shower of sooty atoms, as if all the chimneys in Great Britain had, by one consent, caught fire, and were blazing away to their dear hearts' content. There was nothing very cheerful in the climate or the town, and yet was there an air of cheerfulness abroad that the clearest summer air and brightest summer sun might have endeavoured to diffuse in vain.

For, the people who were shovelling away on the housetops were jovial and full of glee; calling out to one another from the parapets, and now and then exchanging a facetious snowball -- better-natured missile far than many a wordy jest -- laughing heartily if it went right and not less heartily if it went wrong. The poulterers' shops were still half open, and the fruiterers' were radiant in their glory. There were great, round, pot-bellied baskets of chestnuts, shaped like the waistcoats of jolly old gentlemen, lolling at the doors, and tumbling out into the street in their apoplectic opulence. There were ruddy, brown-faced, broad-girthed Spanish Friars, and winking from their shelves in wanton slyness at the girls as they went by, and glanced demurely at the hung-up mistletoe. There were pears and apples, clustered high in blooming pyramids; there were bunches of grapes, made, in the shopkeepers' benevolence to dangle from conspicuous hooks, that people's mouths might water gratis as they passed; there were piles of filberts, mossy and brown, recalling, in their fragrance, ancient walks among the woods, and pleasant shufflings ankle deep through withered leaves...

How often do we miss the sights, the smells, the miracles all around us? How often are we so distracted we miss God? We find ourselves discontent? How often is this season, not a time to see God, but simply a time to get through? One author compares attentiveness to God with birdwatching. He said, "if you are walking through the woods, and your goal is to get from point A to point B, you'll get from point A to point B. Sometimes the Christmas season feels that way. "Just get me to Dec. 26!" [I would add that sometimes all of the seasons of the year feel that way]. "But," he said, "if you

are birdwatching, then when you walk through the woods, they come alive with robins and blue-jays and whippoorwills and doves. The same woods that could be simply an obstacle to traverse instead overflow with life, each flap of the wings sounding like the whisper of angels."

For Scrooge, being present in the moment for him was a waste of time. His focus was either on the past and what didn't get done or on the future and what needed to be done. His head was always in his ledger, his eyes on the bottom line, his employee simply a cog in the gear of Scrooge's money-making machine. And, as the ghost showed him, Scrooge missed the overflow of life around him, the "*whispers of angels*" that got drowned out by his own greed.

How often do I, do we, miss the "*whispers of angels*"?

I remember last year, my wife Deb and I decided to stop everything and take two days in Williamsburg, Virginia. Now this is a very busy time of the year for both of us so this was not routine. But what an amazing time we had. It was amazing because we stopped and took in the sights around us, felt Christmas instead of just rush through it, held the moments as well as each other.

I was so relaxed and caught up in the moment I experienced and thought about things I normally push back in the hustle-and-bustle of each day's activities and to-do lists. We went to the Kimball Theatre in Williamsburg and saw "It's A Wonderful Life" with Jimmy Stewart on the big screen. The film touched my heart, made me think about my life and the impact I pray it has on others, made me think about the blessing of family and friends, leading me to give God thanks. By the end of the film I was bawling my eyes out, trying not to embarrass myself too badly in front of Deb.

The next day we were at Christmas Town in Busch Gardens, and we spent the day going to all the shows. The first show we saw was A Christmas Carol. The story came alive for me because I was focused, in the moment, no distractions, and by the end, once again, the tears were flowing. Perhaps, sitting there with my wife, the distractions of life pushed away, I was able to see things, feel things, sense things that normally would be missed. Perhaps the tears came because I was hearing "*the whispers of angels*."

Not just at Christmas, but throughout the year, we fail to see God around us because we are so often distracted by constant activity. We are distracted by television, work, gossip, health issues, kids' sporting events, finances, and upkeep of our homes and automobiles. The list goes on and on. We are distracted by LIFE.

These distractions...

- Keep us from church.
- Keep us from learning about God and what He desires for us.
- Keep us from growing close to God and other Christians through small groups and ministry opportunities.
- Keep us from seeing God working in our lives.
- Keep us from seeing the needs around us and throughout this world and how we can help.
- Keep us from recognizing those in our midst that need a visit, an invitation, or a helping hand.
- Keep us from hearts filled with joy and hope.

In Luke 1, we read that the angel Gabriel appears to Mary and tells her that she has been selected for a special job. She is going to be the mother of the Messiah. The angel tells Mary that the child will be conceived in a miraculous way. The Holy Spirit, himself, will come upon her and she will be with child. She will name that child Jesus.

The scriptures tell us Mary lived in a very small town called Nazareth. In Mary's day, it had a population of between one hundred and four hundred people. Everyone would know everything about everybody and at that time, in that culture, everyone had high moral standards.

She was a single pregnant woman so she would be shunned. Her pregnancy didn't just bring shame to her, it brought shame to her entire family. This is why Luke 1:38 is so powerful. Mary tells the angel, "*I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.*" Mary surrenders all her personal dreams, her desires, her plans, her future, her reputation. She surrenders all of it in order to do God's will.

It is then, Mary lifts her voice...

*My soul exalts the Lord,
And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.
For He has had regard for the humble state of His bonds slave;
For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed.
For the Mighty One has done great things for me;
And holy is His name.
And His mercy is upon generation after generation
Toward those who fear Him.
He has done mighty deeds with His arm;
He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones,
And has exalted those who were humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things;
And sent away the rich empty-handed.
He has given help to Israel His servant,
In remembrance of His mercy,
As He spoke to our fathers,
To Abraham and his descendants forever.*

-Luke 1:46-55

In the midst of her personal dreams ended, her desires replaced, her plans overridden, her future uncertain, and her reputation shattered, Mary sings what is known as the "*Magnificat*," meaning "*To magnify*."

She opens her eyes to see beyond the distractions, beyond what her pregnancy means to her dreams and desires, her plans and her future, and even her reputation. She turns her sights to the God above and the future that God has for His people. She praises God with her entire being, praising God for what He will do for her, what He will do for the world, and what He will do for Israel.

As she focuses on God and His blessings, His plan for her life, she is filled with joy, "*My soul exalts the Lord, And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.*"

A millennium earlier, the prophet Isaiah cried out to the nation of Israel, prophesying a very different future.

*The wilderness and the desert will be glad,
And the Arabah will rejoice and blossom;
Like the crocus will blossom profusely
And rejoice with rejoicing and shout of joy.
The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,
The majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They will see the glory of the Lord,
The majesty of our God.
Encourage the exhausted, and strengthen the feeble.
Say to those with anxious heart,
“Take courage, fear not.
Behold, your God will come with vengeance;
The recompense of God will come,
But He will save you.”
Then the eyes of the blind will be opened
And the ears of the deaf will be unstopped.
Then the lame will leap like a deer,
And the tongue of the mute will shout for joy.*

-Isaiah 35:1-6...

Isaiah spoke during a extremely difficult season in Israel's history. It was a time of great political turmoil as Assyria was expanding its empire, attacking Israel. Yet in the midst of the nation's difficulties, heartaches, and beatings, Isaiah spoke a word of hope, of joy. The prophet cried, "*Say to those with anxious heart Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come...He will save you...*"

In the midst of a host of distractions, the prophet calls on the people to open their eyes to the God in their midst, the God of their past, present, and future, the God who has not and will not leave them. It is with God they will find hope and joy. Isaiah shouts to us to not allow the world around us to cause us to miss what God is doing and is about to do, for "*the eyes of the blind will be opened And the ears of*

the deaf will be unstopped. Then the lame will leap like a deer, And the tongue of the mute will shout for joy."

This is what Tiny Tim wanted to do, to remind those around Him that hope and joy is real. Bob Cratchit tells his wife, "[Tiny Tim] *told me, coming home, that he hoped the people saw him in church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember upon Christmas Day, who made lame beggars walk, and blind men see.*"

Don't we all struggle with the many Ghosts of Christmas Present?

- A vanishing present as we see things changing around us.
- A painful present as we travel through a difficult and hurtful season.
- A humdrum present as we feel trapped and devalued.
- A busy present filled with distractions.

Regardless of the Ghost of Christmas Present we are struggling with, our God is with us, and our God offers us hope today, tomorrow, and forever. We must open our eyes to what is around us, to the moment. Jesus taught us to pray, "*Give us this day our daily bread.*" We must strive to see beyond the distractions to God in our midst and not miss the "*whispers of angels.*"

Look at Mary. Rather than having her situation fill her days with worry and dread, anger and fear, distracting her from God, she chooses to look up. Her eyes are opened to the blessing that is now growing inside her and she sings, "*For the Mighty One has done great things for me; And holy is His name. And His mercy is upon generation after generation Toward those who fear Him.*"

By stopping a moment, slowing down, taking the focus off the problem, removing the distraction, shifting our gaze from past and future to present, and looking up, opening one's eyes and heart to God, we see love and hope and blessing we were blind to just a moment before when we were racing along through life. When we slow down, shift our focus, look up and discover God's presence in our midst, in the midst of whatever craziness surrounds us on that particular day, our focus shifts from self to the needs of others. It is there, our hearts skyward, prayers lifted, the Spirit of Christmas Present, the Holy Spirit,

opens our eyes, and like Scrooge, we find beauty that, just a moment ago, was covered by the dirt of life and the grime of our own self-centeredness.

Once again our Savior causes blind men and women to see. Our eyes will be opened and we will find ourselves singing like Mary, "*My soul exalts the Lord, And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.*" We will find ourselves shouting like the prophet Isaiah, "*...see the glory of the Lord, The majesty of our God. Encourage the exhausted, and strengthen the feeble. Say to those with anxious heart, Take courage, fear not.*" We will find ourselves, in the moment, like Scrooge at his nephew's party, "[jolly] *and light of heart,*" and like Scrooge, we will find ourselves not wanting to leave.



The Ghost of Christmas Future



Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol tells the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, "*a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner!*" who gets the chance, through the Spirits of Christmas Past, Present, and Future, to be redeemed, to have his hard heart softened and his eyes opened to the things of God.

We have heard how the ghost of Jacob Marley, like a prophet of old, came to warn Scrooge, to show him the fate that awaited him if he continued living the life he was living. Marley announces to Scrooge that he will be visited by three ghosts.

We heard how the Ghost of Christmas Past took Scrooge on an amazing journey into his past helping him remember the last time he felt such a thing as joy and love, to the annual Christmas party with his former employer, Fezziwig. The ghost showed him what he could have had, a family and children, if only he had not been filled with greed. The Ghost of Christmas Past, like John the Baptist crying in the wilderness, "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,*" wanted Scrooge to understand that he could make a radical break from his sinful past, just like you and I can, and begin to turn afresh to God.

Then we met the Ghost of Christmas Present, who opens Scrooge's eyes to the world around him, a world that because of his greed and self-centeredness he has never seen. He realizes as he sees the impoverished Cratchits, the hard-working miners, the lonesome lighthouse keepers, all singing of Christmas, all hearts filled with joy, that joy comes from somewhere other than what we have, than what Scrooge had spent his life trying to acquire.

We compared this to Mary, the mother of Jesus, after being told she would have a child, found herself with a shattered reputation and an uncertain future; yet, Mary was able to open her eyes to God above. She did not allow her situation to determine whether or not there was joy in her heart, but instead by focusing on God and His blessings, God's plan for her life, her heart was filled with such joy that she was not able to keep quiet. She sings, "*My soul exalts the Lord, And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.*"

Today, we find ourselves alongside Scrooge as he is visited by the last of the three spirits, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come.

The Phantom slowly, gravely, silently, approached. When it came near him, Scrooge bent down upon his knee; for in the very air through which this Spirit moved it seemed to scatter gloom and mystery.

It was shrouded with a deep black garment, which concealed its head, its face, its form, and left nothing of it visible save one outstretched hand.

But for this it would have been difficult to detach its figure from the night, and separate it from the darkness by which it was surrounded.

He felt that it was tall and stately when it came beside him, and that its mysterious presence filled him with a solemn dread. He knew no more, for the Spirit neither spoke nor moved.

"Ghost of the Future!" Scrooge exclaimed, "I fear you more than any specter I have seen. But as I know your purpose is to do me good, and as I hope to live to be another man from what I was, I am prepared to bear you company, and do it with a thankful heart."

The Ghost of Christmas Future is the most ominous of the three ghosts to visit Scrooge. Scrooge tells him, *"I fear you more than any specter I have seen."* Wouldn't we say the same? For many of us, the future is a frightening thought. It is a ghost that haunts us, worries us. Uncertainty and fear hang like a cloud over the future.

Think for a moment about Mary and Joseph. Mary, visited by an angel and told she would give birth to a child, unmarried, no earthly father, that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and she would have a boy and would call him Jesus. Even though Mary accepted the angel's pronouncement with faith, I am sure there were many moments the thought of the future scared her. How would people treat her? How would Joseph, her betrothed, react? Would they be cast out of their village? Where would they end up? Would she be a good mother to this child of God and what did it mean to be a mother to one who was divine?

And what about Joseph?

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.

And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the

Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."

Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which translated means, "God with us."

And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.

-Matthew 1:18-25

I can only imagine what went through Joseph's head. I am sure he was also concerned about what the future held, how people would react, how would they treat him for taking Mary, a pregnant woman, as his wife. Where would they go? How would he raise this child that wasn't his? The angels said, "*She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.*" Would he be strong enough to raise such a child, to protect this child in the midst of a harsh and unforgiving world?

The future is a scary place, for all of us, and when you add Jesus to the mix, your future, like Mary and Joseph's, becomes even more uncertain. Now, don't misunderstand. When Jesus comes into your life, your eternal future is certain and is going to be incredible, absolutely amazing. But Jesus doesn't offer that same future security in this life. In fact, Jesus can take what seemed to be a very secure future and throw it into total disarray.

Suddenly Mary and Joseph's plans were shattered, the future uncertain. Less than nine months later they found themselves traveling to Bethlehem, pregnant, close to giving birth. Shortly after Jesus was born, they found themselves running from King Herod, running into Egypt, leaving their families, all that they knew behind. Throughout their lives, it would be God, it would be the Christ child, that would direct their steps. And one day, with women wailing, soldiers pushing, the Pharisees shouting, in the midst of great chaos, Mary would kneel and watch as her son was crucified.

The future is scary for all of us because it is uncertain; therefore, in an effort to make our future more certain, we try to control everything. We attempt to take control of our finances, our careers, our relationships, our health. We attempt to plan everything out.

This is the problem with Jesus. When we add Jesus to our lives, our secure futures are thrown into disarray because Jesus doesn't call us to take control. Jesus calls us to give up control. Jesus demands. Just as God demanded of Mary and Joseph, Jesus demands that we relinquish control in our lives. In Luke 16, Jesus Himself said, "*No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other.*" We cannot serve Jesus and ourselves. Jesus and I cannot be co-masters of my life.

It is scary to give up control.

- You have a plan as to what you are going to do with your life, yet Jesus is calling you to do something else.
- You were in complete control of your relationships, but now Jesus is challenging you to break off from those relationships that are unhealthy, reach out to those who you normally wouldn't give a second glance, to forgive even when you do not want to forgive.
- You were in complete control of your finances, but now Jesus is calling you to live with generosity.
- You believed that you were kind to your neighbors, but now Jesus expands the definition of neighbor to include men and women devastated by an earthquake in Haiti, those persecuted for their faith in China, and the many impoverished children in Africa.
- You were comfortable in your political affiliation, but now Jesus is challenging you on whether or not your party's stance is in-line with His teachings.
- You were comfortable in your religious traditions, but now Jesus is challenging every tradition you hold sacred.

- Your goal was a nice, comfortable, suburban life, but Jesus is calling you to take risks, to step "*out of the box*," to have faith.
- You thought Christmas was just a holiday, but now you are discovering that Jesus came into this world not just to be your Savior, but to be your Lord, to be the one who makes the decisions in your life.

As Pastor Mike Edmisten writes, "*If you feel like your future is certain and secure, then you probably haven't fully submitted to Jesus. When you look at people in Scripture who were fully sold out to God, they lived in constant uncertainty.*"

When Ebenezer Scrooge met the Ghost of Christmas Future, he told the ghost, "*I fear you more than any specter I have seen. But as I know your purpose is to do me good, and as I hope to live to be another man from what I was, I am prepared to bear you company, and do it with a thankful heart.*"

If we are going to follow Jesus into the future, your future in this life will be uncertain; but, all of us can rest in the knowledge that God will work within that future for good, helping us become more like His Son, Jesus Christ. This is our hope. No matter what our future holds, we know who holds the future. Even when the future looks incredibly uncertain, even frightening, we know that God will be there to walk with us through it.

But there is more...

The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come takes Scrooge to a funeral. Scrooge knows there is something terribly wrong for no one weeps for the departed. Business associates refuse to go to the funeral unless lunch is served. A relieved couple hopes their debts will die with him, thankful the man is deceased. The cleaning woman and undertaker steal from the defenseless corpse without a hint of remorse. The only tears that are shed are for the young Tiny Tim.

Scrooge finally discovers, as he stares at his own tombstone, that the man, whose life ending brought no tears, was him. There is no spouse or children by his side when he takes his last breath, no friends to miss him and to speak at his funeral. No one protects his lifeless body. Scrooge realizes that he got rich off the

poor, struck fear in the hearts of his debtors, and didn't lift a finger to help Tiny Tim.

He cries out to the ghost, "*Before I draw near to that stone to which you point,*" said Scrooge, "*answer me one question. Are these the shadows of the things that will be, or are they shadows of things that may be, only?*" Still the Ghost points downward to the grave by which it stood. "*Men's courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead,*" said Scrooge. "*But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus with what you show me!*"

"Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life!"

Not only will God walk with us in the uncertainty and work within our lives for good, God will touch the lives of many people through us along the way if we allow Him to have control.

A Christmas Carol shows us that once Scrooge opens his heart to the Spirit of Christmas, what Dickens would say was synonymous with the Spirit of the Christ Child, his life is forever changed. His life touches the lives, blesses the lives of many, many people. This "*altered life*" is a life of an uncertain future, but also a life that truly makes a difference as the Spirit of Christmas is able to work through Scrooge all year round.

Dickens describes the power Death has over such a person.

Oh cold, cold, rigid, dreadful death, set up thine altar here and dress it with such terrors as thou hast at thy command: for this is thy dominion! But of the loved, revered, and honored head, thou canst not turn one hair to thy dread purposes or make one feature odious. It is not that the hand is heavy and will fall down when released; it is not that the heart and pulse are still; but that the hand WAS open, generous, and true; the heart brave, warm, and tender; and the pulse a man's. Strike, shadow, strike! And see his good deeds springing from the wound, to sow the world with life immortal!"

Death cannot destroy a person who has given their life to Christ, who has allowed God to be in the driver's seat. Such a person will not only live on eternally but will live on in this world, "*his good deeds springing from the wound.*" Such a

person will live on in the lives he or she touched, ministered to, and cared for. In Revelation 14:13, John writes, "*Then I heard a voice from heaven say, 'Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.' 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.'*"

I have officiated over more funerals than I could count. And some people get up and talk about how the person loved to hunt or play golf. They tell a funny story or two and laughter runs through the sanctuary. But the funerals that are most powerful are honoring the lives of individuals who truly gave God control, who moved into the future with faith, letting God work through them. I have a t-shirt that reads, "*Live your life in a way that the preacher doesn't have to lie at your funeral.*" These people have done that. Their funerals have stories of faith, stories of selflessness and sacrifice, stories of helping others, reaching out to the less fortunate, making a difference. Those funerals celebrate a life that was not wasted, but rather left a legacy, that "*sow[ed] the world with life immortal.*" This is the type of funeral I am sure the "*altered*" Scrooge had...This is the type of funeral I pray I will have.

Like Mary & Joseph, our futures may seem uncertain, even scary, but let us go into the future with faith, giving God control. The future may be uncertain but the fact that God will walk with us through it is not, and not only will He walk with us through it, but God will work through us, if we give Him control, to touch the lives of countless men, women, and children. One day, at our funeral, may there not only be tears but celebration. May our faith, the joy we shared, the impact God made on others through us, be remembered.

May the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come show us, like Scrooge, that we can change our futures today and that our futures can change countless lives for the good. All we have to do is surrender and let God have control.



Bah, Humbug No More



Charles Dickens wrote his famous A Christmas Carol in 1843, and from the very first, it sparked changes in the people who read it, momentous and generous changes. Robert Louis Stevenson, author of *Treasure Island*, wrote a friend, “*I want to go out and comfort someone; I shall never listen to the nonsense they tell one about not giving money—I shall give money; not that I haven’t done so always, but I shall do it with a high hand now.*” Years later, after the queen of Norway read A Christmas Carol, she sent gifts to disabled children in London, signed “*With Tiny Tim’s love.*” And an

American industrialist, Mr. Fairbanks of Massachusetts, having heard Dickens' own reading of the book one Christmas Eve, was so inspired he closed his factory the very next day for Christmas, managing to get a turkey to every worker and their family. In the spring after A Christmas Carol was published, one English magazine noted that charitable giving was up across the whole country, the result of this one little book.

What is the power of Dicken's fable? Why does such a little book, not even 100 pages, continue to impact so many people? Why would one preach from it on the most holiest of nights, Christmas Eve, over 150 years later?

It is because the story of Ebenezer Scrooge is **OUR STORY**.

Ebenezer Scrooge is described as "*a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner!*" He is constantly focused on his work. He is filled with greed; it is money that drives him. He has disconnected himself from people. Dickens describes him as "*self-contained, and solitary as an oyster.*" Scrooge does not allow himself to get close to people, to be vulnerable, to feel. Scrooge carries the hurts from his past with him; he allows his past to define him. His eyes are closed to the plight of human needs around him because he is so focused on himself. The Spirit of Christmas, the Spirit of the Christ-child, is not in him. Like many in this world he has so much, yet is still miserable because he is missing the one thing that matters.

His Story is Our Story.

There have been times for all of us, perhaps some of us are there now, when the Spirit of the Christ-child was not in us. For all of us there have been times when the things of this world have driven us, the need for money, success, to be loved, times when we have refused to open ourselves up to others, to feel, times when our priorities have been askewed, when as men we did not fulfill our role as the spiritual head of our families, when church and the Bible and relationships have not been given the time they deserve. For all of us there have been times when we could not face the truth about ourselves, could not look in the mirror and deal with those areas of our lives that were not where they should be, times we

ignored the hurting and poor. We have been, or perhaps even now, are, in many ways like Ebenezer Scrooge.

God's Word tells us this is true. It should come as no surprise. Romans 3:23 states, *"For all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious standard."* J. Ellsworth Kalas explains, *"When we live below our best potential, when we're mediocre when we ought to be fine, cheap when we ought to be noble, shoddy when we should be upright - this is sin. When we are anything less than godly, it's because we are involved in this scandal called sin."* And like Scrooge, who has no mercy, is shown mercy through the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future, you and I have been shown mercy and grace, not through ghosts appearing in the night but in the form of a child born in a manger.

Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased." When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, "Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us." So they came in a hurry and found

their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart. The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.

-Luke 2: 1-20 (NASB)

God's gift. John 3:16 explains, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."*

This child, this gift, changed the world. This child, this gift, has gone on to change countless lives, leading to greater transformations than even that of Ebenezer Scrooge.

The Ghost of Christmas Past shows Scrooge the woman he left for his love of money, what he might have had, a family. The Ghost of Christmas Present shows Scrooge his employee's, Bob Cratchitt's, meager home and surroundings, the sick, Tiny Tim, as well as the Spirit of Christmas being lifted up in song and action by men and women who had little when it comes to worldly standards. The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come shows Scrooge how his death would bring no one sadness, his life would have impacted no one for the better. After all this, Scrooge falls down before the third ghost and cries, *"Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life? I will honor Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year."* And at that moment Scrooge finds himself back in his bedroom.

"I don't know what to do!" cried Scrooge, laughing and crying in the same breath; and making a perfect Laocoon of himself with his stockings. *"I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel. I am as merry as a school-boy. I am as giddy as a drunken man. A merry Christmas to everybody! A happy New Year to all the world. Hallo here! Whoop! Hallo!"*

Scrooge's transformation is beautiful and amazing as his frozen heart melts and he acts with generosity, gives to the poor, cares for Bob Cratchitt and his family, embraces his nephew, and genuinely cares for his neighbors. His transformation is

beautiful and amazing as joy, the Spirit of Christmas, the Spirit of the Christ-child, enters his heart.

And it all starts with Scrooge crying out for mercy and recognizing his need, desiring his heart changed. Scrooges cries, "*Spirit, ' he cried, tightly clutching at [the Spirit's] robe, 'hear me! I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been...Good Spirit...intercede for me and pity me...*"

This is Scrooge's moment of repentance. Repentance is a "*decisive turning,*" a "*changing of the mind.*" It means turning around and going in the opposite direction.

Can you identify at least one obstacle, one road block, that would keep Christ from coming more fully into your life in the year ahead? Can you identify where your life has become cluttered, pushing Christ out? Can you identify perhaps one area where you might be a bit more like Ebenezer Scrooge than you care to admit? Is there an area of your heart that has grown cold?

For Scrooge, three ghosts came and opened his eyes to the truth. For you and I, a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths came, grew to be a man, was crucified between two thieves, rose again, conquering death. This child, this Christ, came to offer us grace and mercy and forgiveness. Christmas is about God's light coming into our darkness. The prophet Isaiah predicted that when the messiah came into the world, then "*the people who walked in darkness*" would see "*a great light.*"

God loves us to save us from the grim future that we make for ourselves when we do not allow our lives to be defined by or subject to the unconditional love of God. God coming in human skin, to be the Christ child born in a manger, is God's mysterious, unique way of saying to all of humanity, "*I love you.*" Romans 5:8 explains, "*But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.*"

Dickens' three ghosts are God's love. The Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future are frightening, transforming, nurturing, and forgiving. Each of us, in striving to choose a new future, a future of God's light and love, must ask God in the present, today, to forgive us for the mistakes, injuries and sins of the past, in order to create a new and better future.

When the Spirit-of-Christmas-Yet-to-Come shows Scrooge his eventual grave, and the possible reality that he will die lonely and fettered to his shadows and darkness, Scrooge begs for another chance crying, *“I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I have been.”* Christmas means allowing the light of God to lead you and I to say those very words.

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17, *“Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.”* John recorded Jesus’ words in Revelation 3:20. *“Jesus says, ‘Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with me.’”*

May God's grace, this Christmas, wake us up from the world in which we have grown so comfortable, the life we have created. May God’s grace wake us up from our own plans exchanging those plans for the life God has for us. May God’s grace lead us all, like Ebenezer Scrooge, to say, *“I am not the person I was. I will not be the person I have been”...“Bah Humbug, No More.”* May it be said of us, like it was of Ebenezer Scrooge, that we *“knew how to keep Christmas well [all the year], if any man possessed the knowledge.”*

With God, so much more awaits us. So many more lives will be touched through us. With God, when we get to the end of this life, there will be no regrets. Instead we will find ourselves filled overflowing with gratitude and hope, the hope that came down that first Christmas Eve.

In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.”



He Knew How Keep Christmas Well



While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

-Luke 2:6-7

Then the Angels appeared to the shepherds watching over their sheep and...

The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born to you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

-Luke 2:10-11

The wise men actually did not visit Jesus until a year after His birth, but our Christmas cards show the three of them, bearing gifts, standing with the shepherds, visiting the Christ child, in the stable.

After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshipped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

-Matthew 2:9-11

The wise men visited the Christ child, not to get something from Jesus, but to give something to Jesus. They did not arrive simply with words of praise and worship, but with a tangible expression of the faith they expressed, gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

What gifts do we bring the Christ child? How do we honor Him? How do we show Christ that our faith is more than simply words?

In Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol, Ebenezer Scrooge is shown what he might have had by the Ghost of Christmas Past. He is shown the Spirit of Christmas shining even in the poorest of conditions, including Cratchit's meager home, by the Ghost of Christmas Present. He is shown his own death and the failure of his life to make any difference by the Ghost of Christmas Future.

After experiencing all the three ghosts showed him, Scrooge falls down before the third ghost and cries, "Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life? I will honor Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year." And at that moment Scrooge finds himself back in his bedroom.

“I don’t know what to do!” cried Scrooge, laughing and crying in the same breath; and making a perfect Laocoon of himself with his stockings.

“I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel. I am as merry as a school-boy. I am as giddy as a drunken man. A merry Christmas to everybody! A happy New Year to all the world. Hallo here! Whoop! Hallo!”

Scrooge's transformation is beautiful and amazing as his frozen heart melts and he acts with generosity, gives to the poor, cares for Bob Cratchitt and his family, embraces his nephew, and genuinely cares for his neighbors. Scrooge's transformation is beautiful and amazing as joy, the Spirit of Christmas, the Spirit of the Christ-child, enters his heart.

Dickens ends A Christmas Carol...

Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all, and infinitely more, and to Tiny Tim, who did NOT die, he was a second father. He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough, in the good old world...and it was always said of him that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God Bless Us, Every One!

He knew how to keep Christmas well. This is the gift we bring the Christ child! This is how we honor Him? This is how we show Christ that our faith is more than simply words? We live a life for which the same that was said about Ebenezer Scrooge might be said of us. *“He knew how to keep Christmas well.”*

What must you and I do so the same may be said of us?

First, LOVE. Love is the foundational piece to *"keeping Christmas well."*

Dave Simmons tells the following story...

I took Helen (eight years old) and Brandon (five years old) to the Cloverleaf Mall in Hattiesburg to do a little shopping. As we drove up, we spotted a Peterbilt eighteen-wheeler parked with a big sign on it that said, "Petting Zoo." The kids jumped up in a rush and asked, "Daddy, Daddy. Can we go? Please. Please. Can we go?"

"Sure," I said, flipping them both a quarter before walking into Sears. They bolted away, and I felt free to take my time looking for a scroll saw. A petting zoo consists of a portable fence erected in the mall with about six inches of sawdust and a hundred little furry baby animals of all kinds. Kids pay their money and stay in the enclosure enraptured with the squirmy little critters while their moms and dads shop.

A few minutes later, I turned around and saw Helen walking along behind me. I was shocked to see she preferred the hardware department to the petting zoo. Recognizing my error, I bent down and asked her what was wrong.

She looked up at me with those giant limpid brown eyes and said sadly, "Well, Daddy, it cost fifty cents. So, I gave Brandon my quarter." Then she said the most beautiful thing I ever heard. She repeated the family motto. The family motto is in "Love is Action!"

She had given Brandon her quarter, and no one loves cuddly furry creatures more than Helen. She had watched both of us do and say "Love is Action!" for years around the house. She had heard and seen "Love is Action," and now she had incorporated it into her little lifestyle. It had become part of her.

What do you think I did? Well, not what you might think. As soon as I finished my errands, I took Helen to the petting zoo. We stood by the fence and watched Brandon go crazy petting and feeding the animals. Helen stood with her hands and chin resting on the fence and just watched Brandon. I had fifty cents burning a hole in my pocket; I never offered it to Helen, and she never asked for it.

Because she knew the whole family motto. It's not "Love is Action." It's "Love is SACRIFICIAL Action!" Love always pays a price. Love always costs something. Love is expensive. When you love, benefits accrue to another's account. Love is for you, not for me. Love gives; it doesn't grab. Helen gave her quarter to Brandon and wanted to follow through with her lesson. She knew she had to taste the sacrifice. She wanted to experience that total family motto. Love is sacrificial action.

"...and it was always said of him that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us!"

If such words are to be said about you and I, we must first love sacrificially.

Maybe you can look back at a time in your life where you felt a lot closer to God, where you felt a lot more passionate for your spouse, where you felt a greater capacity to love the stranger, or where you felt closer to your friends and family. Perhaps those you are now feeling distant with haven't moved. Certainly, God hasn't moved. Usually, it is us that has moved.

Revelation 2:4-5 reads, "...*You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.*"

Love is not a feeling. Love is a choice, love is an action. To keep Christmas well throughout the year, we must choose to rekindle our love for God and for others. Choose to do the things that will rekindle your relationships with God and others. Choose to read the Bible, choose to pray, choose to worship, choose to serve, choose to make the phone call, choose to write that letter, choose to forgive, choose to visit, choose to help, choose to love. When we choose to act with love, passion comes back into our friendships, our marriage, our relationship with God.

"...and it was always said of him that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us!"

Secondly, to live such a life we must have Integrity. Integrity is simply integrating what I say I believe, and if I believe God and His Word, integrating what the Bible says into my daily walk. Our lives on Sundays cannot be different than our lives Monday through Saturday. The opposite of integrity is compartmentalizing your life.

Think of your life like a pie. There are all these different slices in the pie. There is a slice representing your career, one representing your marriage, a slice representing family, perhaps slices representing hobbies, politics, finances, health, and education, and then there is a God slice.

But God says I don't want to be just one little slice in your pie of life. God demands first place in your life or no place at all. Mark 12:30..."*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*" ALL. God wants to be at the center of every slice, every area, every decision, every battle, every relationship, every choice, every day. We must live with integrity, making sure God is integrated into every area of our lives.

"...and it was always said of him that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us!"

To live such a life we must have Forgiveness...

Ephesians 4:32 states, *"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."*

When we carry around resentment and bitterness it takes our focus off what is important. It destroys relationships. It eats away at the legacy we want to leave. Jesus is our example. On the cross, he prayed, *"Father, forgive them for they don't realize what they are doing."* He forgave those who were crucifying Him.

The Italian artist Leonardo da Vinci was commissioned to paint a mural on a monastery dining hall in Milan, Italy. The result was *The Last Supper*, one of the most recognized and beloved works of art in the world. It depicts Jesus sitting with His disciples at a feast table just after He told them that one of them would betray Him.

During the time da Vinci was working on the piece, he got into an argument with another famous artist—Michelangelo. They had *"an intense dislike for each other."* The two were jealous of each other's work and often made disparaging comments about one another in public.

Legend has it that when the time came for Leonardo to paint the face of Judas in *The Last Supper*, he got the sinister idea of using the face of his rival, Michelangelo, to be the face of the betrayer. People came by as he worked and gasped when they recognized the face of Michelangelo as Judas. Leonardo felt some temporary vindication

But then came the last step in his grand artwork—painting the face of Jesus. As he tried to capture the image of Christ, he would paint His countenance but would feel dissatisfied and wipe it away. For the next few weeks, he did this over and over again. He had Jesus' body completed, but he couldn't create the right face—that magnificent countenance of mercy and kindness.

In desperation Leonardo prayed that he could paint the face that would express the love and compassion of Christ. *“Lord, help me to see Your face,”* he pleaded with God.

Finally, a voice spoke to his heart, saying, *“You will never see the face of Jesus until you change the face of Judas.”* Leonardo was convicted. He thought about Jesus on the cross praying for the forgiveness of those who crucified Him, and about how offended he himself had been by petty insults. He erased Michelangelo’s face and painted the image we see today.

Only when Leonardo let go of his bitterness toward Michelangelo and removed the offense could he clearly paint the image of Christ.

Only when we let go of our bitterness and forgive can we see the face of Christ and can others see Christ in us.

“...and it was always said of him that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us!”

To live such a life we must have Enthusiasm.

One of my favorite writes, Ralph Waldo Emerson said that nothing great ever happens without enthusiasm in life. Enthusiasm comes from two Greek words, *en* and *theos*. *Theos* is the Greek word for God. *En* simply means in. Enthusiasm literally means God within.

If you have no motivation, no passion, no enthusiasm, you may have to ask yourself, *“Do you have God within?”*

When we start hanging out with God, when we start getting excited about the things God cares about, when we start caring about the things God cares about, when we start spending time with a God who is extremely passionate, we will become excited, caring, passionate.

The Creator of the Universe is watching what we do. And God tells us, Colossians 3:23, *“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord...”* Whatever you do, do it with enthusiasm. We are working for God, not for man.

Tomorrow when we go to work, when we are with our families, when we are making decisions, when we are doing the little things no one else notices, God notices. God knows and God says that we will be rewarded one day if we do it for Him with all our hearts. We are to live lives excited about God because we have “*God within*”.

Ebenezer Scrooge, thanks to God's mercy and three dynamic ghosts, got a second chance and left quite a legacy. *"and it was always said of him that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us!"*

One day we will stand before God and we will see what kind of legacy we left, what is said of us.

- What kind of legacy did we leave when it came to our families? When our children and grandchildren think of us, what comes to mind? What did they take from us and are now able to give to others?
- What kind of legacy did we leave when it came to our marriages? How did others see us with our spouse? Were they inspired by our marriages to work on theirs, to love their spouse and God more deeply?
- What kind of legacy did we leave when it came to our work? Did we build up the company we worked for? Were we generous to our employees? Did we influence others around us positively? Did we reflect Christ in our day to day encounters?
- What kind of legacy did we leave when it came to our church? Did our words lift others up? Did we help the ministry move forward or did we hold it back? Did we love those brothers and sisters who God placed in our lives as part of our church family?
- What kind of legacy did we leave? What did people see in us? How did our words and actions lift others up and point them to God?

In other words, what gift did our life bring to the manger, to the Christ child?

"...and it was always said of him that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us!"

I pray the same may be said of you and I, that each of us lived a life of Love, Integrity, Forgiveness, and Enthusiasm, and that each of us kept Christmas well all year-round! May we live in such a way because God first loved us and He showed us His love by sending His Son that first Christmas morning.

Might such a life be our gift to the Christ Child!