

A Christmas Carol

Book and Bible Study Guide
Based on the Charles Dickens Classic
A Christmas Carol



Book by Charles Dickens
Study Guide by Alan Vermilye



Introduction



A CHRISTMAS CAROL by Charles Dickens has always been a favorite of mine. However, I must confess that it is not through Dickens's novel that I was first exposed to this classic piece of literature. No, I, like probably many of you, followed Ebenezer Scrooge through classic movies, television shows, plays, and, yes, Scrooge McDuck. In fact, it was not until recently that I read the book in preparation for this study. I'm so glad I did!

Many of Dickens's other novels and short stories made their way into my formative years' reading, including *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield*. *A Christmas Carol*, unfortunately, was never "required reading" in school. Too bad...it should have been.

It's amazing how one book's vernacular has become commonplace during the holiday season. We're accused of being a "Scrooge" if we lack yuletide cheer, and we have fun reciting Tiny Tim's charge, "God bless us every one." And who of us has not uttered the occasional "Bah Humbug!" when standing in long checkout lines during the holidays?

Dickens wrote the novel both because he needed money at the time and to dictate a powerful social message that he wished to convey. Now, over 160 years later, this message is still being played out in movies, commercials, greeting cards, and our own subconscious, where we, too, challenge ourselves

to be full of the “Christmas spirit,” as Scrooge was that Christmas morning. It is possible that no other single piece of fiction has had the kind of sweeping cultural influence that can be attributed to Charles Dickens’s first Christmas story.

In addition to the Christmas spirit, there are many themes that run deep through this book, most notably the themes of redemption and free will. It is fascinating to watch Scrooge’s transformation from a mean, penny-pinching miser to a loving, generous benefactor. Scrooge has the wonderful and frightening opportunity to see visions of the future where he is told of things that “may” be, not what “will” be. He has the power to change the future with his present actions...and so do we!

Scrooge’s transformation was life altering and not limited to the Christmas season. It was permanent. Each day after, he desired to be a better man for himself and his fellow man.

If you, too, had the opportunity to see how your present actions would impact the future, what would you change?

One action I thought I would take is to write this study. I’m not an expert on Dickens’s literature nor a biblical scholar, but I do enjoy writing studies. I hope that reading this classic novel, watching one of the many movies, and thinking through the corresponding study questions will draw you closer to the only one who can provide lasting transformation—Jesus Christ.

Old English Terms



Following are some old English words encountered in *A Christmas Carol* that you might not be familiar with.

Debtor's Prison - Until 1869 in Britain, unpaid debts resulted in a term in prison. Since prisons were private enterprises, conditions varied from awful squalor with prisoners of all types (often along with their families) crowded into large common cells to those where the prisoners were allowed to leave during the day to earn their keep and eventually pay off their debt. Charles Dickens own father and some of his family was sent to debtor's prison.

Counting House - Scrooge ran a financial office where accounts of trade and lending were kept.

Union Workhouse - Poor people who could not afford to live unassisted were required to reside in the charity-run workhouse where conditions were harsh and work demeaning so as to encourage the able-bodied to help themselves.

Treadmill (or tread wheel) - This machine was used as a form of punishment in prisons in which the prisoner operated the device for long hours to grind grain or raise water. It was a machine powered either by stepping on a continuous series of treads or steps or by pushing a spoke of a large wheel to make it go round.

Character Summary



EBENEZER SCROOGE

Ebenezer Scrooge, the protagonist, is a miserly, money-hungry creditor who weighs everything by profit and possesses absolutely no Christmas spirit. He has no sympathy for the needy, nor does he believe in charity; he is certain that those who cannot find work are lazy. He has no room in his life for friends or family and wishes the world would just leave him alone. After visits from the ghost of his former business partner and the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future, he undergoes a dramatic life transformation, from a greedy, coldhearted person to one of charity and love seeking to help and serve others in life.

JACOB MARLEY

Jacob Marley is Scrooge's former and equally greedy business partner who died seven years prior. He appears as a ghost before Scrooge on Christmas Eve to warn him of the horrors that await him unless he changes his path in life. Because of the selfish life that he lived, Marley is condemned to wander the earth in death while bound in heavy chains with an unquenchable desire to help others but unable to do so. Marley tells Scrooge of the three ghosts who will visit him—Scrooge's only chance for salvation.

BOB CRATCHIT

Bob Cratchit is Scrooge's loyal, overworked, and underpaid clerk. He is a kind and loving man, husband, and father with a large family. He has a crippled son, Tiny Tim, who needs treatment in order to survive, but his salary is so meager that he cannot afford it. Although treated poorly by Scrooge, Bob bears no ill will toward him and even offers a toast for Scrooge on Christmas Eve. He maintains a positive outlook on life despite his circumstances and feels blessed and content with what he has.

THE GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PAST

The Ghost of Christmas Past is the first spirit to visit Scrooge. This spirit takes him on a tour of his path from early childhood through his young adult years and helps him realize that his interests have turned from people to money. The ghost has a beam of light jetting from his head, and Scrooge extinguishes the light when he feels that he is unable to bear any of the other memories that the ghost is showing him.

THE GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PRESENT

The Ghost of Christmas Present is the second spirit to visit Scrooge. This spirit is a loud, jovial giant clad in a green robe and spreading Christmas cheer; his lifespan is restricted to one day. He escorts Scrooge on a journey through various holiday celebrations in the current time, showing Scrooge how those in his life are enjoying Christmas without him.

Introduction Session



THE MAIN THEME found in *A Christmas Carol* is the celebration of Christmas and the good it inspires. However, Dickens weaves many themes throughout the pages of his classic novel, including traditions, Christmas spirit, family, social injustice, greed, generosity, forgiveness, the threat of time, and, most importantly, redemption and free will. Regardless of where you are in life, one of these themes will most likely resonate with you.

Icebreaker:

What is your favorite Christmas tradition and why?

Discussion Questions

1. When you hear the word Scrooge today, what comes to mind? What type of person exemplifies the typical Scrooge today? How do you handle the Scrooges in your life?

2. When you hear the words bah humbug, what comes to mind? Have you ever felt like uttering those or similar words during the Christmas season? Why?

3. If someone were to ask you, “What is Christmas spirit?” how would you answer? For some, why does the Christmas season bring out a desire to want to help the less fortunate?

4. When asked to make a Christmas donation to the poor, Scrooge adamantly refuses in favor of government institutions that he supports for that endeavor. The three institutions that Scrooge supported were the workhouses, the prisons, and the treadmill. Do some research, and describe those institutions and the Poor Laws that enabled them during 19th century Victorian England.

5. To understand why Charles Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol*, we need to look no further than the person of Ebenezer Scrooge. How might Dickens's father being sentenced to a debtor's prison when Charles was just twelve years old have impacted his writings on this subject?

6. Scrooge stereotyped the poor and needy as "idle." What are some stereotypes that we might harbor about the poor or needy today? Do you think that most people consider it the government's responsibility to provide for the needy? Why do you think many people might have become hardened or cynical to the poor and needy?

7. Read Proverbs 14:31, 22:9, and 28:27 and Matthew 19:21. What do these passages say about serving the poor and needy among you? According to these verses, what happens when we help the poor? Whose job does Scripture say it is to take care of the poor—the government or the people?

8. Why might we sometimes avoid helping others less fortunate? How do the following passages tell us to respond to the poor that might also be someone we dislike or an enemy? Read 1 John 3:17, Luke 6:35, and Romans 12:20.

9. The Bible commands that we be generous and that we help those in need (especially our Christian brothers and sisters). How do we know when we are being taken advantage of? Read 2 Thessalonians 3:10.

10. The concept of time is a theme that runs throughout the book. Scrooge is haunted by the ghosts of the past, present, and future. There are bells chiming and clocks tolling, reminding Scrooge of time passing. The chain that Marley bears reminds Scrooge of an endless prison sentence. Read Psalm 39:4–5 and James 4:13–17. What do these verses say about how we should manage our time here on this earth?

11. Through the story, we witness Scrooge's transformation from a mean, penny-pinching miser to a generous benefactor. His transformation and redemption are made possible through his free will. If you had the opportunity to see a vision of the future based on the choices you are making now, would you do it? Why or why not? How might it impact how you are living right now?

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