

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



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

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Version 1

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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.

Course Notes and Study Format



How to Use This Guide

In studying and reading Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, you will find the study divided up into five sessions (or in Dickens’s terms, five “staves,” a synonym for “stanzas,” in keeping with the carol/song metaphor). Discussion questions are found at the end of each stave and are structured to be highly flexible. Feel free to adapt the study to the distinct personality of your own group or for individual study.

Studying

Each week you will read the corresponding stave for each session. As you read, make notes in your book and underline or highlight sections that you are drawn to. The answers to each question as well as a Scripture Reference Guide can be found at www.BrownChairBooks.com. However, do not cheat yourself. Work through each session prior to viewing the answers.

Group Format

For groups, the study works well over six consecutive weeks. The first week is an introduction week and does not require any reading of the novel prior to class but rather provides an introduction to and biblical study of the book. You might also have those who have previously read *A Christmas Carol* or

have seen one of the movies share their thoughts and experiences with this classic.

This study lends itself very well to both Sunday school classes as well as midweek times at a church or in the homes of group members. Session length is variable. Ideally, you should allow at least 60 minutes per session.

Using This Study with a Movie

There are many movie adaptations of *A Christmas Carol*, and everyone has their favorite. I found *A Christmas Carol* starring Patrick Stewart, made in 1999, to be my favorite. In my opinion, it follows the storyline the closest, and the characters of Marley and the Ghost appear truer to the book. However, none of the movies are word for word to the book, and each take some creative license.

My class also found it fun to watch a few minutes of various segments of the movie during each week's Bible study session. It provides interesting visuals that complement the story.

If you do not use a movie in class, I would highly recommend hosting a movie night to gather and watch one of the versions or, at the very least, encourage each participant to watch the movie of their choosing on their own time.

Book Summary



IS AN OVERVIEW of *A Christmas Carol* really needed? After all, isn't everyone familiar with the story of Scrooge and Tiny Tim?

Not necessarily. At least, this is what I found out when I led the study at my own church. Don't get me wrong. Everyone is familiar with the character of Scrooge, a miserly old man who hates Christmas. His name conjures up the same feelings as that of Judas or Benedict Arnold—you know he's bad, but you might not know exactly why.

So I surmised that an overview would be helpful for those approaching this classic for the first time. It will not help you in answering the study guide questions—you will need to read the book and have your Bible handy for that—but it will provide the framework to get you started.

The story starts on a cold and bleak Christmas Eve as Ebenezer Scrooge, a cold-hearted, stingy, and greedy creditor, sits working in his counting house alongside his clerk, Bob Cratchit. The frigid and dark office makes working conditions difficult, but Scrooge overlooks the needs of his employee and refuses to put more coal on the fire. When his nephew, Fred, full of the Christmas spirit, drops in to wish his uncle Scrooge a hearty “Merry Christmas” and invite him to dinner, he receives a “Bah! Humbug!” in return. Charity workers soon follow collecting money to feed, clothe, and house those less

fortunate and are immediately dismissed by an ornery Scrooge.

Scrooge returns home that evening to a dreary old house once owned by his former partner who died seven years prior, Jacob Marley. Later that night, Marley visits Scrooge in the form of a ghost wrapped in heavy chains, suffering in the afterlife for being consumed with business and not people's lives while he lived. Now condemned to wander the earth, he has an unquenchable desire to help others but cannot. He comes to warn Scrooge that he is destined for the same fate or worse. He tells him that he will be visited by three spirits over the next three nights.

Scrooge is cynical and questions what he has just experienced. As promised, the first spirit, the Ghost of Christmas Past, arrives and takes Scrooge on a journey of prior Christmases. He relives the lonely years of his childhood as well as the fun and exciting years of serving as an apprentice to Fezziwig the merchant. But he is most tortured by the memory of his own greed as a young man, which drove him away from his fiancée and love of his life, Belle. He begs the spirit to take him home.

The Ghost of Christmas Present comes and takes Scrooge on a trip through the streets of London, showing him how Christmas will unfold that year. He first takes Scrooge to the home of Bob Cratchit, and they watch the large family prepare a meager meal for their Christmas festivities. He also discovers that Bob has a crippled child, Tiny Tim, whose love and kindness are felt by all around him, including Scrooge. The spirit then ushers him away to Fred's house, where he

finds a delightful gathering of friends playing games and celebrating the Christmas holiday. Scrooge also witnesses others all over the world celebrating Christmas in their own way. As the day progresses, so does the age of the Ghost as he reveals two starved children, Ignorance and Want, living under his coat.

The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come is the spirit Scrooge fears the most. This spirit leads Scrooge through various startling scenes all pointing to the death of a wealthy, unnamed man. No one seems upset about this man's death but rather happy about it. Scrooge, believing these scenes have some significance to his own future, wants to understand the meaning but then is shocked and saddened to learn of the death of Tiny Tim. He pleads with the ghost to show him his own fate, and the spirit takes him to the graveyard, where he finds his name on one of the headstones. Stunned and amazed, he now realizes that he was the dead man in the prior visions. He implores the spirit to alter his fate and promises to honor the spirit of Christmas in his heart, not just at Christmas but all year long. He awakens to find himself in his bed hugging his bedpost.

Scrooge is overwhelmed with joy as he realizes that he is not doomed and that redemption is still possible. His joy cannot be contained as he rushes out to the streets to wish everyone a Merry Christmas. He also sends a large Christmas turkey to the Cratchits and makes a surprise visit to Fred's house, where he enjoys dinner and games. The next day he gives Cratchit a raise and promises to help his family. As the years go by, he keeps his word by honoring Christmas with all

his heart and even becomes a second father to Tiny Tim, who does not die young.

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.

Poor Law –A system of poor relief in which paupers were either forced into workhouses or given to overseers who hired them out as cheap labour.

English Money - Before decimalization in 1971, there was a bewildering set of money notes and coins. The British Pound sterling (or quid) was about the largest unit, and a considerable amount in the time of A Christmas Carol. The pound was divided into 20 Shillings (or bob) and each shilling was divided into 12 Pence or pennies. Some other coins included the Farthing (1/4 pence) and Quarter Farthing Florin (2 shillings), Crown (5 shillings), Sovereign (20 shillings) and Guinea (21 shillings).

Camden Town - The unfashionable, market area in the northern part of old London where Bob Cratchit and his family lived. This is also where Charles Dickens lived as a boy while working to support his parents and siblings.

Roger de Coverley - When Scrooge is taken by the Ghost of Christmas Past to visit the home of Fezziwig, Scrooge's old employer, this is the name of the festive country dance they perform. It is related to the Virginia Reel with the two rows of dancers facing each other and individual dancer weaving between the lines.

Norfolk Biffins - Norfolk Biffins were a variety of apple which were short and fat and became dark brown or maroon in colour by Christmas time, hence "Norfolk biffins, squab (fat) and swarthy (dark skinned)

Gruel - A thin, soupy form of porridge made of boiled ground grain such as millet, oats or barely, or even acorns or peas.

Carrying Dinner to the Baker's - The homes of the poor were equipped with open fireplaces for heat and cooking but not with ovens. When something such as goose had to be roasted it was taken to the bakery to be cooked. Bakers were forbidden to open on Sunday's and holidays but would open their shops on these days to the poor and bake their dinners for a small fee. Christmas was a very busy time for bakers.

Twice-Turned Gown - Mrs. Cratchit's best dress which she wears at Christmas has been turned inside out to get more wear out of it. When the inner side became worn also it was turned back out again to get still more wear.

The Pudding singing in the Copper - The Christmas pudding is steamed in the copper vat over the small stove used to heat water for washing and laundry. The steam is whistling out of its spout.

Apprentice at a Milliner - Martha Cratchit is an Apprentice at a Milliner. Apprenticeship was a system of training young people in a skill or trade. Apprentices were usually about ten to 15 years of age and would live in the master craftsman's household for the seven years required to be accepted into the profession. Although most apprentices were boys learning all kinds of trades, girls were occasionally apprenticed to dressmakers or milliners (hat makers).

Smoking Bishop - A drink made of wine and port, sweetened and steeped with oranges, grapefruit and cloves, and served warm.

Excerpted from *A Christmas Carol Study Guide*, The National Arts Centre English Theater Programmes for Student Audiences 2009-2010 Season, Peter Hinton, a National Arts Centre English Theatre Company production.

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.

THE GHOST OF CHRISTMAS YET TO COME

The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come is the third and final spirit to visit Scrooge and the spirit that Scrooge fears the most. The silent spirit is cloaked in a hooded black robe reminiscent of the Grim Reaper and shows only a hand that points Scrooge to the things he is to take notice of. The spirit represents death and presents Scrooge with an ominous view of his lonely death and the death of Tiny Tim.

FRED

Fred is Scrooge's kind-hearted nephew who loves Christmas and actually pities his miserly uncle because although he has money, he is still alone and unhappy. Each year, he invites his uncle to Christmas dinner only to be refused and ridiculed by Scrooge. He refuses to let Scrooge's attitude bring him down and insists that he will visit his uncle each year on Christmas Eve and invite him regardless of Scrooge's negativity.

TINY TIM

Tiny Tim is Bob Cratchit's youngest son, who is filled with goodness, love, and the Christmas spirit. Despite the fact that he is crippled, he is cheerful and desires that others would be reminded of how Christ healed the lame and blind when looking at him. Scrooge is touched by his innocence and gentleness and inquires of his fate. After learning from the Ghost of Christmas Present that Tiny Tim will die if the future does not change, Scrooge desires to prevent this fate from occurring.

MRS. CRATCHIT

Mrs. Cratchit is Bob's kind and loving wife, who holds little love or patience for Scrooge.

THE CRATCHIT CHILDREN

The Crachits have six children, including their oldest son, Peter; their oldest daughter, Martha, who works in a milliner's shop; Tiny Tim; another daughter, Belinda; and two smaller children, a boy and a girl.

OLD JOE, MRS. DILBER, LAUNDRESS, AND UNDERTAKER'S MAN

This group of thieves meet at Old Joe's pawn to sell Scrooge's belongings that they stole from him after his death. They harbor no remorse for their thievery based on the fact that Scrooge was a cruel, miserly old man and there was no one else to whom he could leave his wealth.

MR. FEZZIWIG

Mr. Fezziwig is a jovial, selfless merchant to whom Scrooge is apprenticed as a young man. He is a very generous man who is renowned for his wonderful Christmas parties that he holds for his staff every year. Fezziwig's kindness makes Scrooge regret how poorly he treats Bob Cratchit, his own employee.

CHARITABLE WORKERS

The two charitable workers visit Scrooge at the beginning of the story seeking contributions for the poor and destitute. Scrooge refuses and throws them out of his office while

insisting that he supports government institutions that are set up to provide aid. After his transformation, he meets one of them on the street and offers a large sum of money to one of the men.

BELLE

Belle is Scrooge's former fiancée who breaks off their engagement when Scrooge's love for her is replaced by his pursuit of greed and wealth. She later marries another man and has children while Scrooge remains alone.

FAN

Fan is Scrooge's younger sister and Fred's mother, whom Scrooge loved dearly but who died young. As a child, Fan convinced her father to allow Ebenezer to return home from school one Christmas.

THE DEBTORS

The debtors are a young couple who owed Scrooge an amount of money that they cannot repay. Upon learning of his death, they are relieved in hopes that the new creditor who will assume the debt will be more lenient.

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?

Download the Answer Guide and Scripture Reference Guide at
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