

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

Today we are continuing in our series Christmas at the Movies. We are looking at popular Christmas movies and looking for biblical truth in them. The book A Christmas Carol was written by Charles Dickens and published in 1843. It tells the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, an elderly miser who is visited by the ghost of his former business partner Jacob Marley. He is then visited by the spirits of Christmas past, present and future. After their visits he wakes up on Christmas morning completely transformed into a kinder, gentler man.

A Christmas Carol is one of the best known books in English literature. It has been adapted into more than 20 movies as well as countless theatre performances and television programs. In addition to all the live action movies there have been many animated ones. There was Mickey's Christmas Carol with Scrooge McDuck. The Muppet Christmas Carol, Barbie's Christmas Carol (2008), Bugs Bunny's Christmas Carol, The Jetsons Christmas Carol, Alvin and the Chipmunks Christmas Carol, The Flintstones Christmas Carol and even Mr. Magoo's Christmas Carol.

The clip we saw this morning was from one of my favorite adaptations, the 1951 film Scrooge starring Alastair Sim. So what is it that makes this story so compelling? What can we learn from this story?

Titus 3:3-7 At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. 4 But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

Paul is writing to Titus and the church in Crete to remind them of who they are in Christ. He reminds them of where they came from, their present position and where they are going in the future.

A few weeks ago I spoke about Jesus healing the demonized man. His life was changed through his encounter with Christ. Through the power of Jesus he was transformed. In this movie, Ebenezer Scrooge is also transformed. What do the 3 spirits of Christmas represent?

1. Healing of our Past (3-4)

In order to be truly transformed, you have to deal with the hurts in your past. All of us have blown it. All of us have made mistakes. We often carry the bondage of those mistakes with us.

In the story, Ebenezer Scrooge starts out a nice enough person. He had a difficult childhood and was sent off to boarding school which was very lonely at times for him, but he had a loving sister and an employer who treated him like a son. He falls in love with a nice girl called Belle and they plan to get married. He has a lot going for him. However, his poor upbringing meant that he was always worried about money. He makes the mistake of placing financial security over everything else in his life, including his relationship with Belle. He allowed his past fears to destroy his future.

The Ghost of Christmas Past takes him back in time and he visits the house of Belle on the Christmas Eve that Marley had died years before. Belle is now happily married and living in a big house with a loving husband and a large family. He realizes what he had lost and the man that he had become.

Paul writes to the church in Crete saying;

Titus 3:3-7 At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.

For Ebenezer Scrooge, the deception was that money would buy him security and happiness. It did not. Instead, it robbed him of it. He was so busy making a living he missed out on life. Jesus said;

Luke 12:15 Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

All of us have blown it. All of us have been deceived. It may not be in the area of wealth, but all of us like Scrooge have at one time been like the people of Crete; foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved. So how do you deal with a guilty conscience? How do you treat a heart that is burdened with guilt and shame? The answer is forgiveness.

Dr. Karl Menninger, the famed psychiatrist, once said, "If I could convince the patients in psychiatric hospitals that their sins were forgiven, 75 percent of them could walk out the next day."

A London psychiatrist once echoed this in a conversation with Billy Graham. He said that one of the primary causes of mental illness was people living in guilt for which they could find no relief. He said that 70% of the people in treatment in England could be released if they could only find forgiveness.

I heard the story about a country doctor in Scotland. His patients had no money, and would often pay him in eggs and chickens. Vegetables at harvest and meat at slaughtering time. His ledger book would contain many names, symptoms, treatments, and prescriptions, but a lot of empty boxes or columns where nothing was paid. Once per year, the doctor would go through his book and write "Forgiven" wherever he knew the patients would never be able to pay.

When the doctor died and his heirs received all of his material possessions, they brooded over the ledger book and all of the "Forgiven" debts. Eventually, they tried to take some of the patients to court. But according to the story, the old Scottish judge said that there was no way that any court in Scotland could possibly find for the heirs when the physical evidence of the ledger was so eloquent with its message of "Forgiven, Forgiven, Forgiven" on every page.

Often people today are told they have nothing to be guilty about, and in some circumstances that is true. Some people feel guilty about things they have not done: things that have been done to them by responsible adults, who have abused and misused them. They need help to see who is to blame. But most people with guilty consciences don't need to be told that they are guiltless. Deep down they know there something to be guilty for, and what they need is not to hear that they are guiltless, but that they are forgiven.

Not far from New York City there is a cemetery where there is a grave which has inscribed upon the headstone just one word "Forgiven" There is no name, no date of birth or death. The stone is undecorated. Just one word "Forgiven", but that is the greatest thing than can be said of any person or written on any grave

Like scrooge, all of us have blown it. We were deceived and enslaved. The good news is that we do not have to live there. There is a way to find healing and forgiveness.

2. Help in our Present (4-6)

In the story, Ebenezer Scrooge treats the people around him badly. The son of his sister named Fred has grown up and been married but Scrooge never visits and has nothing really to do with them. His employee Bob Cratchit is a faithful worker, but Scrooge is more interested in what he can get from him than give to him. Because of this, he is not aware that Bob has a young son named Tiny Tim who is seriously ill.

The Ghost of Christmas Present comes and shows Scrooge the joy that he is missing. How all around him people are happy and celebrating while he is alone in his dark room. This joy is interrupted at the end when the spirit informs him that if nothing is done for Tiny Tim, that he will die.

The mistakes of our past have a tendency to rob us of joy in our present. We miss out on the joy that God offers because we carry around heavy burdens of guilt and shame. God never intended us to live the Christian life this way.

2 Corinthians 3:17-18 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Paul says to the church on Crete;

Titus 3:4 But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior

What a contrast. The pain of deception and bondage replaced with joy through the pouring out of God's grace and mercy.

John Ortberg tells the story that back in 2009 there was a church service where they were honouring 3 students who had just graduated from Azusa Pacific University in California. The students all had a heart for missions and had dedicated themselves to spending the next two years serving the poorest of the poor in India. These three students thought they were there just to be commissioned and sent out with a blessing - which they were. But then something happened that they did not know was coming.

John turned to them and said, "I have a piece of news for you. There's somebody you do not know - an anonymous donor - who is so moved by what you're doing that he has given a gift to this university in your name, on your behalf." John turned to the first student and said, "You are forgiven your debt of \$105,000." The kid immediately starts to cry, completely blindsided by the news. John turns to the next student: "You're forgiven your debt of \$70,000." The kid completely loses it. He then turns to the third student: "You are forgiven your debt of \$130,000." All three students had no idea this was coming. They were just ambushed by grace - blown away that somebody they don't even know would pay their debt. The whole room was in tears.

In a sense, that's what happened to us when we trusted Christ as our Savior from sin. We were "ambushed by grace." Christ paid a debt we could never pay - the debt of our sin - and freed us up to go and serve.

3. Hope in our Future (7)

In the story, the Ghost of Christmas Future shows Scrooge what will happen if things do not change. We see that Tiny Tim has died and that his death is very hard on Bob Cratchit and his family. He also sees that he will die, and that there will be no one around to mourn him. All the things that he values and has placed his hope in will be lost and taken away. His life will have accounted for nothing.

It always amazes me when I do a funeral and see people who experience the death of a loved one but it has no impact on them. They do not realize that one day they too will be laying there in a casket. They never seem to come to terms with their own mortality.

As he is lead into the cemetery, Scrooge asks an important question, "Before I draw near to that stone, answer me one question. Are these the shadows of things that **MUST** be, or are they only shadows of things that **MIGHT** be?" Upon seeing his own grave he cries out saying "Tell me that I am not already dead. I am not the man I once was. Why show me all this if I am already beyond *hope*?"

There is that word... **HOPE**. There are many people who live lives without hope. They are in a bad situation and they think that things will never change. Things are never going to get better.

With Jesus, there is always hope. There are no such thing as an impossible situation. Our God is the God of the impossible.

A few weeks ago Shirley and I went to visit someone in the hospital. It was a joint room, the other person had the divider pulled. While we were there for a short visit, I noticed that the doctor came in and spoke to the patient in the other bed. As we were leaving I glanced over to the patient with the pulled divider and heard him say "Pastor Steve?" Turns out he was also someone who also came to the church. He had just received some very difficult news from the doctor. What are the odds that we go to a random room and the few minutes we are there a patient we did not go to visit gets bad news and we are available to sit and pray with them and remind them of the hope we have in Jesus?

Paul reminds the church in Crete;

Titus 3:7 so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

When Scrooge woke up that Christmas morning, he realized that he had been given a second chance. He knew then that things in his life could change, that there was still hope. It was this realization that lead to his outburst of joy. He is a changed person.

I heard the story of a middle-aged woman who had a heart attack and was taken to the hospital. While on the operating table she had a near death experience. She saw God and asked Him if this was it for her, is she was dead. God said no and explained that she has another 30 years to live. After her recovery she decided that since she was going to live another 30 years that she had better make the most of it. She had a face lift, liposuction and a tummy tuck. She had a hairstylist come and change her hair color and style. She looked completely different, like a new woman. Then one day she stepped out into traffic and got hit by a bus. When she arrived in heaven, she approached God and said, "I thought you said I had another 30 years to live!" God replied, "I'm sorry, I just didn't recognize you."

My wish for all of us this Christmas is that we will be so transformed by the grace and mercy of God that people will see it in our lives. They will look at us and say, “you look different, I didn’t recognize you!”

In the video, Scrooge says something very profound to Bob Cratchit. He says, “I haven’t taken leave of my senses Bob, I’ve come to them.”

The joy in the life of Scrooge should not be the exception, it should be the norm. Everyday we are surrounded by God’s blessings. How often we simply fail to see them. Nothing has really changed in Scrooge’s life. He wakes up in the same bed, in the same room, in the same house that he had been the night before. His family and business are the same. The only thing that has changed is his perspective. He is seeing his life through different eyes. That is my prayer for all of us this Christmas. That we would see our lives the way God sees them.

Christmas is a time of giving gifts. We see the gifts under the tree, but do we see all the other gifts that may not be wrapped up in paper and ribbons. May God open our eyes so that we can see that life itself is a gift. That every morning is a gift. The food in our refrigerator, the roof over our heads, everything in our lives is a gift.

Video – what if we saw everything as the gift that it is?

Scrooge says, “I don’t deserve to be so happy. I can’t help it. I just can’t help it!” None of us deserves it. That’s the point. Life is a gift.

This Christmas, let’s remember the one who gave us this gift. The great cost it took to purchase it. How do we respond to God’s gift to us? With thankfulness and love.

I heard the story of a guy who, when he was growing up., hated vegetables. His parents tried everything they could think of to get him to eat vegetables but nothing worked. They tried to bribe him, they threatened him. Nothing worked. Then in University he met a girl called Linda. She would have him over to her parents house for dinner. She would look at him and say, "Aren't you going to eat your vegetables?" So he would. Soon he wasn't even thinking about what he was doing. One Sunday he went out for lunch with his parents. They were going through the line at a buffet when Linda looked at him and said, "Aren't you going to have a little broccoli?" Bam, on to the plate it went. As he put it on his plate he saw his mother grab his father's arm. He asked what was wrong, and with a look of shock she said, "You're eating vegetables." Later she told him "I knew you were in love when you were willing to eat your vegetables for her." Love makes us do things that we wouldn't normally do and it is not a burden doing them but a blessing. That is what happens when we experience the love of God. It transforms us.

As we come to this communion table this morning, we are reminded of the price that Jesus paid for our salvation. Maybe some of you have seen this picture that is going around – “This is the season, this is the reason.” Someone posted it on Facebook and I read a comment under it saying “Isn’t this more of an Easter thing than Christmas?” Without Easter, Christmas makes no sense. Without the cross, the birth of Jesus is meaningless. Jesus came into this world so that He could die for our sins. That is what we are celebrating this morning. As you take this bread and cup again today, remember old Scrooge. Remember his joy when he awoke that Christmas morning. His new found gratitude.