

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A Candle Lit

God bless Us, Every One!

TINY TIM

It may just be the most well-known literary work on the planet. And it is only going to become more popular as millions relive the story each December through their television screens.

My personal favorite is the 1951 production starring Alastair Sim. I own the video, along with several others. One stars George C. Scott, another alters the story with Henry Winkler as a Depression-era American miser named Benedict Slade. There is also a wonderful Focus on the Family radio dramatization my family enjoys each year, and a Mickey Mouse animated retelling for the kids. I'm sure there are at least twenty other adaptations that have been brought to life on the big screen, with actors like Bill Murray, and the small screen or stage, with stars like Patrick Stewart. They all are directly or loosely based upon the masterpiece that none surpass or even completely capture: *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens.

I won't bother retelling the entire story. It is a popular fantasy, with four ghostly visitations to the Christmas-loathing humbug named Ebenezer Scrooge—whom Dickens describes as a “squeezing,

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wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner.”⁵² But by the end, the Scrooge everyone fears and despises gets transformed into “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.”⁵³ And that, at the core, is why we love it so much. Scrooge One makes us frown while Scrooge Two makes us smile. We know how the story ends, yet we enjoy watching the transformation year after year after year. Why is that, and what does it tell us of God?

Scrooge One is a man who, if possible, seems happy in his misery (or at least content there). He seems unaware and unconcerned that he emanates the darkness of hell, even as those around him bask in the light of heaven. Wealth fails to warm his spirit, as surely as poverty fails to chill theirs. Dickens paints him as a man possessing all of the qualities necessary to repel rather than invite human affection, as if intentionally gathering such traits to himself.

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, shrivelled 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 low temperature always about him; he iced his office in the dog days; and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas.⁵⁴

His cold, prickly shell served its purpose. None stopped to greet him on the street. Beggars knew better than to seek his charity. No children asked him the time. “Even the blind men's dogs appeared to know him;” says Dickens, “and when they saw him coming on, would tug their owners into doorways and up courts; and then would wag their tails as though they said, ‘No eye at all is better than an evil eye, dark master!’”⁵⁵

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Scrooge One is the kind of person none of us want to know, but all do know. In fact, at certain times and in certain ways, he is someone we all can be. We all hide from those reflecting the warm light of heaven whenever we imprison ourselves in the cold solitude of self-pity or self-hatred. I myself go there from time to time. It is not a place I like to stay long. But I imagine I could grow accustomed to it, perhaps even learn to prefer it. Many do. Scrooge did.

Never is the contrast between chosen darkness and the light of God more evident than when Ebenezer meets the first of three Christmas spirits. Such brightness shone from his aged yet child-like head that Scrooge wished it covered by a cap the ghost carries under his arm. “‘What!’ exclaimed the Ghost, ‘would you so soon put out, with worldly hands, the light I give? Is it not enough that you are one of those whose passions made this cap!’”⁵⁶

Eyes accustomed to darkness abhor bright light. Dark hearts do the same.

Most adventure tales feature a virtuous hero forced to leave the comforts of a nice life to confront and overcome the perils of evil—perhaps to free a captured friend or lover. In this story, the model gets turned on its head. Ebenezer is jerked from a loathsome existence to face the perils of good. Instead of winning the day, he gets soundly defeated by an enemy who pries freedom’s key from Scrooge’s tightly clutched fist. Once released, the prison cell opens, inviting him to leave its shadowy coldness and enter the warm brightness of the light beyond. The joy he so jealously guarded himself against finally invades his pale existence. The crooked wick of Ebenezer’s candle is finally lit.

And what a lighting! Literally overnight, a hard, miserly Mr. Scrooge becomes the lovable, generous Uncle Ebenezer. After dragging the reader through the journey of Scrooge One in 95 percent of the story, Dickens finally makes it all worthwhile by introducing Scrooge Two. It doesn’t take long. We get only a few snapshots

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of what can happen when light overtakes darkness, as when he dances in the bedroom upon realizing he hasn't missed Christmas.

"I don't know what to do!" cried Scrooge, laughing and crying in the same breath. "I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as merry as a schoolboy. I am as giddy as a drunken man. A merry Christmas to everybody!"⁵⁷

Or turning a child into coconspirator by sending the prize turkey to Bob Cratchit's home.

"Go and buy it, and tell'em to bring it here, that I may give them the direction where to take it. Come back with the man, and I'll give you a shilling. Come back with him in less than five minutes and I'll give you half-a-crown!"⁵⁸

Or shocking the skeptical charity director by making a sizable donation to the poor.

"Not a farthing less. A great many back-payments are included in it, I assure you."

Or playfully scaring his tardy employee at work the following morning.

"I am not going to stand this sort of thing any longer. And therefore, I am about to raise your salary! I'll raise your salary, and endeavor to assist your struggling family, and we will discuss your affairs this very afternoon, over a Christmas bowl of smoking bishop, Bob! Make up the fires, and buy another coal-scuttle before you dot another i, Bob Cratchit!"⁵⁹

Just a few scenes, but enough to let us know a candle now shines because a man has been transformed. Despite his miserable past, or maybe because of it, the story has a happy ending. His is a tale of redemption—of sudden, unexpected joy. My ability to identify with Scrooge's prison lets me share in the delight of his release.

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It creates a lump in my throat and melts my spirit like frost-nipped hands before a blazing fireplace.



Have you ever noticed that virtually every religion links solving humanity's problem with the concept of light? Eastern faiths and New Age gurus, for example, invite us to embrace higher consciousness through "enlightenment" so that we can rise above the darkness of ignorance.

Jews light candles to reflect a God whom the Torah describes synonymously as "my light" and "my salvation." They also celebrate the Law, which is called "a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path."

Catholics do the same because Jesus claimed to be "the light of the world." Protestants don't light as many candles, because some don't want to appear Catholic. But we all hang Christmas lights, in part to impress the neighbors. We also do it because the Bible tells us "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all." Christ commanded us, "Let your light so shine before men."

Even those who reject formal religion associate solutions with light and problems with darkness. We "shed light on the subject" in order to dispel ignorance. We celebrate the "Enlightenment" for bringing us out of the so-called "Dark Ages." We smile to brighten someone's day. We sit in dark rooms when depressed.

Light is a universal symbol of good. We even draw hope from dying people who claim to see a bright light. We don't know the source of that light. They could just as easily be peering into the scorching flames of hell as the warm glow of heaven. But deep down we sense that light implies good, something to welcome, while darkness suggests bad, something to avoid. I have yet to meet a child afraid of the light.

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Light is more powerful than darkness. You can light more candles, but you can't turn up the dark. Darkness is a negation, defined by what isn't rather than what is.

Some words we easily associate with darkness, such as hate, greed, and fear. Scrooge One lived in their shadow. Others fall in the category of light, like love, kindness, and hope. Scrooge Two basked in their glow. My favorite word is another in light's column: the word *redemption*. Redemption bridges the chasm between warm and cold, bright and dull, joy and sorrow, Scrooge One and Scrooge Two. It makes wrong right again, rescues us from darkness and places us in the light. And thankfully, it is a word God loves putting to use.

No matter how many times or ways I enjoy the tale, *A Christmas Carol* prompts an overwhelming urge to smile at what the story reflects and invites. It reminds me that God can invade the deepest darkness and warm the coldest heart. It tells me that he can even rescue me from the prison of things I most desire, freeing me to reflect rather than extinguish heaven's light. And, as Tiny Tim observed, it shouts the good news of redemption by declaring, "God bless Us, Every One!" Indeed. He has.

INKLING

GOD IS THE LIGHT OF LIFE.