

“The Shadow of Things To Come”

Acts 26:4-18

Series: A Christmas Carol – From Humbug to Hope

Week 3. The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come - Grasping Hope in the Darkness

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When the bell struck twelve, Scrooge looked up to behold the last ghost.

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

And the ghost said, “Scrooge, I am your father.” Boy, Star Wars shows up everywhere! This weekend Star Wars VII: The Force Awakens opened on thousands of screens across America. If you know anything about the previous six movies, you may notice a certain parallel between Ebenezer Scrooge and Darth Vader. They both start off as boys without a father figure. Though they initially show great promise, eventually both are tempted and taken over by the dark side. Scrooge destroys families and terrorizes London. Darth Vader destroys planets and terrorizes the universe. It’s basically the same story. And each is given a final chance for redemption. Each receives an invitation to escape the dark side. To each comes an offer of hope.

Hope is held out to Scrooge through a frightening gift. Three ghosts give him a guided tour of his life. Normally, this would not move the old miser. At the beginning of the book he is happy with the way he is. To his nephew Fred he says,

“Keep Christmas in your own way, and let me keep it in mine.” “Keep it!” repeated Scrooge’s nephew. “But you don’t keep it.” “Let me leave it alone, then,” said Scrooge.

To the men who ask for a donation he yells, “I wish to be left alone,” said Scrooge. “Since you ask me what I wish, gentlemen, that is my answer.” Scrooge lives by a principle that’s become quite popular in our day: ‘Do whatever pleases you so long as no one gets hurt.’ You do your thing, I’ll do mine and we’ll both be fine. The ghosts shatter this lie by forcing Scrooge to face the truth: his life impacts and injures all the lives around him – including his own. He severs family ties with Fred, breaks the heart of his fiancée Belle, avoids the cries of wretched street children, squeezes every ounce of work from Bob Cratchit, and puts the life of Tiny Tim at risk.

The most disturbing truth about his life is revealed in the shadows of things to come. The dark robed Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come escorts Scrooge to a funeral. Not my idea of a holly jolly Christmas scene. As they pass through these future shadows, we sense what Scrooge cannot see: that the cold body lying under a ragged sheet is his. Yet despite his blindness, Ebenezer knows there is something deadly wrong. No one weeps for this departed soul. Business associates refuse to go to the funeral unless lunch is served. A relieved couple hopes their debt will die with him. They are thankful the man is deceased. The cleaning women and undertaker steal from the defenseless corpse without a hint of remorse. In fact, the only tears are shed not for

Scrooge but over the vacant stool and tenderly preserved crutch of Tiny Tim. The dreadful truth finally strikes Scrooge when he traces his own name chiseled into a tombstone. He is the man.

It's not death that troubles Ebenezer. He knows he will die someday. The truth that finally cracks the hard shell around his heart is he got his wish: he was left alone. There is no spouse or children by his side when he takes his last breath, no friends to miss him and bid him goodbye at his funeral, no one to protect his lifeless body or his hard-won wealth from thieves. What's more, he now realizes how he got rich off the poor, struck fear in the hearts of his debtors, and didn't lift a finger to help Tiny Tim. In these shadows of things to come, Scrooge discovers his whole life has been a shadow – a dark, frightening form that inspires fear but is ultimately empty.

Scrooge witnesses what you may have wondered: what will they say at your funeral? Who will be there? How many will be there? How will they sum up your life? What accomplishments will they mention? What stories will they tell? Will there be laughter, tears, both? Perhaps most important of all: What legacy will you leave behind? What lasting impression will you make?

I can't imagine anyone wants to leave a sour aftertaste like Scrooge. We would rather be like George Bailey from "It's a Wonderful Life." On Christmas Eve, George is sinking in a swamp of self-pity. He always surrendered his dreams to help others and do what's right. While others saw the world, started successful businesses and won glory on the battlefield, George stayed home and fought the battle of Bedford Falls. Now, on Christmas Eve, he even takes the blame for a large sum of money his uncle lost. George reaches his lowest point. Yet like the ghosts who give Scrooge a fresh look at his life, Clarence the angel allows George to see what life would be like if he'd never been born. He discovers his one little boring life in Bedford Falls made a tremendous positive ripple effect on countless lives at home and around the world. What's more, the love and help he freely gave all those years comes back many times over when his friends flood in to offer their aid. George is praised as "the richest man in town" because he has so many friends. Wouldn't you want them to say that at your funeral?

Now before we burst into a chorus "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," and fade to black, think about this: is that what you are living for? Is that the purpose of your life? To be more like George Bailey and less like Scrooge? To positively impact others and have loads of friends say nice things about you when you are gone? That's good. But it's not enough. Consider this: the Ghost of the Future doesn't take Scrooge to his funeral. He shows him something worse – what *everyone* is saying about him. The family and friends who attend your funeral will certainly say nice things about you there. It's what people say the rest of the time that paints a detailed portrait of your highlights and shadows. After all, there is a mixture of George and Ebenezer in all of us.

Now if that doesn't depress you then consider this: your funeral will be about a half hour long, maybe 45 minutes, one hour tops. I should know. I've done a lot of them. I promise I'll do my best for you. After all, someone told me when it comes to funerals I should get the award for "Best of Bucks." You have my guarantee: I will give it my all. I will try to make it the best 30 or 45 minutes of your life – except that your life will already be over. If you want I'll even try to make it fun because, as one funeral director told me, you can't spell funeral without f-u-n.

Please forgive me for making light of a serious time – especially if you have recently lost a loved one. My point is not to depress you. I hope to prevent you from living for the day you die. No matter how many attend your funeral, after it's over they will all go on with their lives. Sure, your family and close friends will miss you deeply. Yet even they will eventually learn to live with your loss. If you think about it, living for the praise of people is just as misguided as Scrooge living for money. It's foolish and hopeless since even the most powerful and influential people will eventually be forgotten. Bob Welch offers a different way to live.

Instead of seeing how people react to our death, ask how God might react to our life. John 12: 43 talks about people who “loved human praise more than praise from God.” There's a big difference between the two. The praise of God is consistent, while the praise of man is fickle. How many athletes and entertainers who were stars yesterday have been forgotten today? Heroes to zeroes. One-hit-wonders. Has-beens. What's more, the praise of God is everlasting, while the praise of man is temporary. The Scriptures instruct us to give honor to whom honor is due (Romans 13: 7). It's encouraging to hear people at a funeral or memorial service praise someone for a life well lived. But if that's our goal— to earn accolades at our memorial service— then we're shooting too low.¹

If we are not supposed to live for profit or praise, what is the goal of life?

Grab Hold of Hope. This hope is not wishful thinking. This hope is not all my dreams coming true. This is the hope of a relationship with God through Jesus – the hope of eternal life, the hope of heaven which begins now on earth. The Apostle Paul lived for this hope. At his trial before King Agrippa, Paul shared this hope.

It is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today. This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. King Agrippa, it is because of this hope that these Jews are accusing me. Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead? (Acts 26:6-8)

Paul doesn't live for profit or praise. He holds on to God's hope.

He wasn't always like this. Back when his name was Saul he was a lot like Scrooge. Both Saul and Scrooge are successful. Scrooge squeezes the poor, Saul seizes heretics and infidels. Both Saul and Scrooge believe what they are doing is right. Yet both Saul and Scrooge live in spiritual darkness. Their eyes have adjusted to the darkness so that the darkness is normal. Yet both Scrooge and Saul go through an eye-opening experience.

Now Saul doesn't know he is blind. In fact, Saul is convinced he sees God better than anyone else. Like a terrorist, he is driven to persecute those who don't believe as he does.

I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord's people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them

¹ Bob Welch, *52 Little Lessons from a Christmas Carol* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2015) p. 101 Kindle Edition.

punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities. (Acts 26:9-11).

Saul was filled with faith – blind faith. He couldn't see God. Why don't we see Jesus? The problem is not with our eyes. We have an "I" problem. In Greek, the word for "I" is ego. Make sense? To help us see, God must perform surgery on our "I"s. Saul needed an "I" operation. There are many different "I" problems. Saul, like Scrooge, has the toughest one: **Stubborn Independence**. When it comes to religion, Saul says he is perfect. (Philippians 3:6). He isn't earning profits or praise. He is earning his place in heaven. He doesn't need God's help. He is completely independent. He can do it himself. But Saul's righteousness made him *self-righteous*. He persecutes whoever does not believe as he did. He claims he was doing it for God. Yet Saul is so blind he can't see God. He doesn't realize he is actually persecuting God.

Then comes the day for Saul's "I" surgery. While on a mission to root out heretic Christians in Damascus, Saul has an unexpected appointment with the Great Physician.

About noon, King Agrippa, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' (Acts 26:13-14)

A goad is what they use to drive an ox. Jesus says to Saul, 'Stop being a stubborn independent ox. Get up on your feet and follow me.' When they help Saul up, he opens his eyes but cannot see. God blinded him so he could see Jesus. First, God performs surgery and removed Saul's "I" – his independence – and then gives him 5 "C"s. To grab hold of God's hope, we need 5 "C"s.

Cease to Be – A Spiritual Death. "For three days Saul was blind" (Acts 9:9 NIV). Why? It's a symbolic death. Just as Jesus was in the tomb three days, so Saul endures three days of darkness and silence. It is his personal tomb. Later he will write, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." (Galatians 2:20). To see Jesus, we must first admit we need Jesus. We recognize there is sin in our lives. You can't negotiate, compromise or cooperate with sin. The only way to deal with it is to kill it. Antibiotics, radiation and chemotherapy kill infections and diseases. That is the only way to be cured. Selfishness, pride, egotism, lust, hatred and any other sin must cease to be. But you and I can't kill it. Only Jesus can. He is the only cure for sin. Only He can heal us.

Consult Your Physician. If you want to see Jesus, there is no substitute for prayer. What was Saul doing during those three days of darkness? Praying. Jesus said to Ananias "Go to a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying." (Acts 9:11). Once, after I had eye surgery, I had to wear an eye patch. I thought it would be cool to preach with an eye patch. I could be "Dead Eye Doug – The Preaching Pirate of the Presbytery." I followed the doctor's directions, kept the eye patch on for three hours, put the antibiotic in my eye for seven days and made a follow up visit the next week. Now my eye is fine. You and I need to continually consult the Great Physician through prayer. If you are not seeing Jesus working in your life, check your prayer life. The more you close your eyes in prayer, the more you will see Him when you open them.

Join the Corps – the Body of Christ. When the blinding light flashed around Saul a voice asked him,

‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ “Then I asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ the Lord replied. (Acts 26:14-15).

Saul thought he was attacking a group of heretics. But in reality, he was persecuting God. That was a big “Uh-Oh” for Saul. Imagine how Hitler will feel when he discovers that the Judge of the Living and the Dead who sits on the throne is Jewish. That gives you a taste of the terror that seared through Saul’s soul. Saul learned when you touch one of Jesus’ followers you are touching Jesus. Later he would call the Church the Body of Christ. The word “corps” comes from the Latin word “corpus” which means body. Saul learned he needed to join the corps to see Jesus. You can’t see Him if you are not part of the Body of Christ.

Receive the Counselor. After three days of darkness, Jesus sends Ananias to Saul saying, “Brother Saul (Jesus) has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 9:17). Jesus calls the Holy Spirit “the Comforter” and “the Counselor.” He literally means, ‘I’m going to give you Someone to stand beside you, to live in you and to give you strength.’ Among the many things the Holy Spirit does, there are two essential roles: the Spirit helps you to understand the Word of God and to speak the Word of God. Jesus said, “Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20 NIV). We feel Jesus and see Jesus through the Holy Spirit. Growth groups are one of the best ways for the Holy Spirit to reveal Jesus.

Finally **Answer the Call.** The last person I would choose to spread the Gospel is a terrorist like Saul. Not Jesus.

Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’

Jesus says, ‘Now that I opened your eyes Saul, I am sending you to open the eyes of Jews and Gentiles. I brought you out of darkness into light so you can help others do the same. I rescued you from the chains of Satan so you can set others free. I delivered you from the prison of sin so you may lead others out. Go give ‘em my hope.’ After Ananias laid hands on Saul and prayed for him, scales fell from his eyes and he could see. After his baptism, Saul immediately answered God’s call to preach about Jesus. And the world was never the same again. This final “C” is crucial. If Saul sat back, prayed, hung out with believers and enjoyed the Holy Spirit, he would have wasted all those blessings. But Saul answered Jesus’ call. He didn’t do it for profit. He didn’t do it for praise.

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my

Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ. (Philippians 3:7-8)

Brothers and sisters, God wants you to see Jesus. He wants you to grab hold of hope. He is giving you all 5 “C” s. You must have all five. And the deeper you go into each one, the more you will see Jesus.

Kim Shin-jo, a terrorist from communist North Korean, was as fanatical as Saul. In January, 1968 he led a strike force of 31 North Koreans into South Korea. He had one mission – to cut the throat of Park Chung-hee the President of South Korea. The assassins successfully infiltrated the South and came within 300 meters of the Blue House, the President’s home, when a violent gun battle erupted. 29 North Korean commandos and 34 South Korean guards were killed. Amazingly Kim Shin-jo survived and surrendered.

They arrested and interrogated him for a year. Though he could see, Kim Shin-jo was blinded by hate for the President and the South Korean way of life. But a surprising change came when Kim Shin-jo met a South Korean army general. A friendship developed between them. The South Korean government eventually released Kim Shin-jo. Over the next three decades he became a citizen, and then married and raised a family. He paid a terrible price for this decision. In the South he was shunned. In the North, his parents were publicly executed and the rest of his family was purged. The pain was so great Kim Shin-Jo considered ending it all.

Then came his wife’s birthday and she asked for a single gift, “Please come to church with me.” When he did, it seemed at first like a communist party meeting. But then he realized they weren’t worshipping the old North Korean leader and his son but the one True God and His Son. In time, the former terrorist and assassin became a preacher of the Gospel. As a minister, Kim Shin-jo has preached at 3,000 Korean churches and 180 churches in the United States, Canada and Australia. Reflecting back over the last 42 years, Kim Shin-jo says,

I tried to kill the president. I was the enemy. But the South Korean people showed me sympathy and forgiveness. I was touched and moved. On (the day I was arrested), Kim Shin Jo died. I was reborn. I got my second chance. And I’m thankful for that.²

Now if God can change the life of a terrorist like Kim Shin-jo and give him hope, imagine what he can do for you.

² "South Korean pastor is also a trained killer," CNN Religion blog (8-9-2010).