

The Ghosts of Our Christmas Past, Present & Future: From Charles Dickens to the First Presidency

By Dennis Beesley

Charles Dickens gave the following reason for his work: “The objects and purposes I have had in view are very plain and simple, and may be easily told. I have always had, and always shall have, an earnest and true desire to contribute, as far as in me lies, to the common stock of healthful cheerfulness and enjoyment.”¹ Dickens knew of the joyful spirit that giving brings to so many during the Christmas season and perhaps illustrated this best in *A Christmas Carol*. While watching the film *Muppet Christmas Carol* (my personal favorite) I felt inspired to read Dickens’ original work. Indeed, the Lord has counseled, “seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom.”² I realized that this is not exactly telling us to seek out the best books either, but the “words of wisdom” within those books. What is surprisingly lacking from the entire text of *A Christmas Carol* is the name of Jesus Christ. While it is a special story that promotes the Christmas spirit we must remember, as President Ezra Taft Benson reminded us, “Without Christ there would be no Christmas, and without Christ there can be no fulness of joy.”³ I realized that Dickens’ desire to contribute to our cheer and joy can best be accomplished only through the love of Jesus Christ. After watching last year’s First Presidency Christmas Devotional, I realized how to better understand Dickens’ contribution in the light of Christ. Just as Ebenezer Scrooge was visited by three ghosts I find it strengthening to picture yourself in his shoes (or slippers as the case may be) at home awaiting the personalized messages from our ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future.

When Ebenezer Scrooge heard the hour bell sound ONE, “the curtains of his bed were drawn aside, I tell you, by a hand. Not the curtains at his feet, nor the curtains at his back, but those to which his face was addressed.” Just as the curtains were drawn aside for Scrooge to see, think of the curtains that veil our eyes from our past. As Scrooge found himself face to face with the Ghost of Christmas Past he was quite nervous about this

title, “Christmas Past,” and asked his visitor a question. “Long past?” inquired Scrooge. “No. Your past.”⁴ If we ask this question of our Ghost of Christmas Past, President Henry B. Eyring, his answer would be as follows: “The story of Christmas is a story of love. We heard this story first before the world was created. Heavenly Father told us of His plan of happiness for all of us, his beloved children. Out of love, he would let us come down from his royal courts to live in a world where we would be free to choose to come home again to Him. He said that because of temptations it would be so hard for us always to choose the right that we would need a Savior. . . . Hearing that story so filled our hearts with love for the Father and His Son that we shouted for joy and worshipped them.”⁵

Indeed, our Christmas past extends beyond this mortal life to the time when we all dwelled with our Heavenly Father. We were present when the council in heaven chose the Savior Jesus Christ to fulfill the Atonement necessary that we may return to our Father. We followed Jesus then and shouted for joy, but this made me wonder where I was when the Savior was born in a manger. What were we doing when “the angel of the Lord came upon [the shepherds], and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this *shall be* a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”⁶

Concerning these verses President Eyring says, “The words of Luke seem almost to bring in our minds and hearts the memory of the sound of angelic music.”⁷ Our Christmas past and our participation in the joy of Christ’s birth began long before mortality. It began at the council in heaven and perhaps we accompanied or witnessed this great multitude of angels announcing the Savior’s birth. Indeed, our Christmas Past was quite pleasant.

Now we must move on from the Ghost of Christmas Past to the Ghost of Christmas Present. Seeing a light from an adjoining room, Scrooge approached the door. “The

moment Scrooge's hand was on the lock, a strange voice called him by his name, and bade him enter. He obeyed." When Scrooge entered the room he saw a marvelous sight. "The walls and ceiling were so hung with living green, that it looked a perfect grove, from every part of which, bright gleaming berries glistened... 'Come in!' exclaimed the Ghost. 'Come in, and know me better, man!' Scrooge entered timidly."⁸ The grove of our Christmas Present is just as marvelous. As a young Joseph Smith knelt and prayed in the sacred grove a glorious light shone upon him, two personages appeared, and One spoke to him, calling him by name, and said, pointing to the other, "This is my Beloved Son, Hear Him!"⁹ Including the Prophet Joseph Smith the Lord has continued to call prophets, seers, and revelators who present to us the words of our Savior, "Come unto me," so that we may know Him better, man.¹⁰

One of our modern prophets today, serving as our Ghost of Christmas Present, is President Dieter F. Uchtdorf. While President Eyring sought to remind us of what we saw and felt in our Christmas Past, President Uchtdorf seemed to give us important guidance for our Christmas Present. He told us a story of the demolition of the chapel that he attended when he was younger. "One of the most striking things about our chapel was its beautiful stained-glass window depicting the Savior and the visit of our Heavenly Father and His Son to the Prophet Joseph Smith. As a young boy, I often looked up at these windows and felt a special spirit... The special feeling in this building seemed to be enhanced during Christmas time." Commenting on the demolishers, President Uchtdorf said, "To them, it probably looked like just another building. Had they been able to see it ... the way I did as a young child, they might have made a different decision."¹¹

To help us see things better President Uchtdorf gives the following advice: "One sees clearly only with a heart. ... Not being able to see the sacred, either with the eyes or with a heart, has been a fault of the human condition since the beginning. ... Sometimes the most precious and sacred things are right in front of us, in plain sight so to speak, but we cannot or will not see them." This is what makes our Christmas Present so important. If we allow ourselves to be "caught up in [our] busy affairs," we may blind ourselves from seeing the Savior.¹² President Uchtdorf's message is very clear in reminding us that

without Christ there is no Christmas. If we are to learn any lesson about our Christmas Present it is that our goal in life should be to live so that we may one day see the Savior with our eyes and hearts.

The Ghost of Christmas Future is perhaps the most mysterious. “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.”¹³ Our Christmas Future is unwritten, but what we learn from Scrooge’s tale is that we are the architects.

After witnessing some scenes of gloom and mystery Scrooge was taken back to the graveyard where he “read upon the stone of the neglected grave his own name, Ebenezer Scrooge.” Kneeling at the grave, he begged forgiveness. “‘Spirit,’ he cried, tightly clutching at his robe, ‘hear me! I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been but for this intercourse. . . . Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me by an altered life!’”¹⁴ As we all know, through Christ we may alter our lives by repentance.

Fortunately, we have a Ghost of Christmas Future, a prophet, President Thomas S. Monson, who leads and guides us as we plan for our future. Sometimes prophets must foretell gloom, but the direction they give us is anything but mystery. President Monson began his talk for the Christmas Devotional as such: “Truth is found in a phrase we sing in one of our hymns – Time flies on wings of lightning – another year has flown by, bringing us again to the Christmas season.” Indeed time flies, but what of our future? So as not to get ahead of ourselves our prophet gives us valuable guidance. “Finding the real joy of the season comes not in the hurrying and the scurrying to get more done or in the purchasing of obligatory gifts. Really, joy comes as we show the love and compassion inspired by the Savior of the world, who said, ‘Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these, ye have done it unto me.’”¹⁵

Ebenezer Scrooge learned of the importance of giving to those less fortunate and, as President Monson reminds us, “as we contemplate how we’re going to spend our money to buy gifts this holiday season, let us plan also for how we will spend our time in order to help bring the true spirit of Christmas into the lives of others. The Savior gave freely to all, and His gifts were of value beyond measure.”

We can exclaim, as Ebenezer Scrooge did, “I will honor Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all three shall strive with me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach.”¹⁶ Of course, learning what we have from our prophets perhaps it is better that we alter these words a bit and say, “I will honor *Christ* in my heart, and try to keep *Him* in my heart all the year. I will live according to the joy I shouted for in my Past, the joy I experience in my Present, and the joy I hope to keep in my Future. The words of the First Presidency shall strive with me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach.”

President Monson concluded his talk with a question, answer, and admonishment for our future: “What is the spirit we feel at Christmastime? It is His spirit; the spirit of Christ... With the spirit of Christ in our lives we will have goodwill and love toward all mankind not only during this season but throughout the year as well. May this be our experience and blessing.”¹⁷

We can learn a lot from the story of Ebenezer Scrooge. As Dickens wrote, “Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all, and infinitely more... Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh, and little heeded them.” As we follow our Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future, our modern-day Prophets, there will be many as if in a great and spacious building laughing at our good deeds, but we, like Scrooge, must be wise enough not to heed them. As for Scrooge, “it was always said of him,” as Dickens wrote, “that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge.”¹⁸ May it always be said of us, that we knew how to keep *Christ* well in our hearts. To do this we can begin with the lessons we learn from Scrooge and continue with those we learn from our prophets. Scrooge was shown Bob Cratchit’s family. If we look

around it would not be difficult to locate the Cratchits in our lives; some are lacking in physical needs, but others spiritually. In another talk by President Monson, he said, “Times change, years speed by; but Christmas continues sacred. In this marvelous dispensation of the fulness of times, our opportunities to give of ourselves are indeed limitless, but they are also perishable. There are hearts to gladden. There are kind words to say. There are gifts to be given. There are deeds to be done. There are souls to be saved.”¹⁹

In our own personal study we can be aided as we seek words of wisdom out of the best books. While there are many excellent books for us to seek wisdom let us never forget that the greatest books are those that testify of Christ. He Lives! I know He lives and that He loves us no matter what happens in our lives. Many of us find the holidays to be difficult, especially if we have lost someone that we love. My late wife passed away on the 23rd of December on the 200th anniversary of the Prophet Joseph Smith’s birth. Each year this season is a reminder to me that it is only through the Atonement of the Savior Jesus Christ that families can be together eternally and that we can enjoy the full blessings of eternal families because of the Restoration of the Gospel through the Prophet Joseph Smith. I bare my witness that Joseph Smith is a Prophet of God, this is the Church of Jesus Christ who is our Savior and Redeemer, and Heavenly Father knows and loves each of us personally.

Christ was a part of our Christmas Past. He is a part of our Christmas Present. May he always be a part of our Christmas Future. This is my prayer and testimony, in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

¹ Charles Dickens, *Speeches: Literary and Social* (BiblioBazaar, LLC, 2008), 14.

² D&C 88:118.

³ Ezra Taft Benson, “Keeping Christ in Christmas,” *Ensign*, Dec 1993, 2.

⁴ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol: Being a Ghost Story of Christmas* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1858), 26-27.

⁵ Henry B. Eyring, “2009 First Presidency Christmas Devotional,” 6 December 2009.

⁶ Luke 2:8-14.

⁷ Henry B. Eyring, “2009 First Presidency Christmas Devotional,” 6 December 2009.

⁸ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol: Being a Ghost Story of Christmas* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1858), 46-47.

⁹ Joseph Smith—History 1:17.

¹⁰ 3 Nephi 9:14.

¹¹ Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “2009 First Presidency Christmas Devotional,” 6 December 2009.

¹² Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “2009 First Presidency Christmas Devotional,” 6 December 2009.

¹³ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol: Being a Ghost Story of Christmas* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1858), 73.

¹⁴ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol: Being a Ghost Story of Christmas* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1858), 90.

¹⁵ Thomas S. Monson, “2009 First Presidency Christmas Devotional,” 6 December 2009.

¹⁶ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol: Being a Ghost Story of Christmas* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1858), 91.

¹⁷ Thomas S. Monson, “2009 First Presidency Christmas Devotional,” 6 December 2009.

¹⁸ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol: Being a Ghost Story of Christmas* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1858), 99-100.

¹⁹ Thomas S. Monson, “The Best Christmas Ever,” *Ensign*, Dec. 2008, 4-8.