

# **The Life of Our Lord Study Guide**

## **The Life of Our Lord by Charles Dickens**

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# Plot Summary

Charles Dickens (1812-1870) is widely known as one of the great novelists of the nineteenth century. He wrote numerous books that are historical classics, including *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations* and *A Tale of Two Cities*. Dickens became popular due to his ability to speak to each member of his audience that he wrote to directly; he has also retained his status for this reason. But in the *Life of Our Lord*, one of Dickens' least well-known books, Dickens wrote specifically for his children. The book was not intended for publication; it went into circulation sixty-four years after he died, in 1934. The book was written in 1846 while Dickens was in his prime. He wrote *The Life of Our Lord* while staying at Lausanne, Switzerland.

*The Life of Our Lord* is the story of the four Gospels of the New Testament. Dickens believed strongly in the New Testament and thought it was the greatest of all books; the *Life of Our Lord* is a condensation of the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John for his children. It hews close to the structure and prose of the Gospels, often using the same phraseology. What will interest mature readers are those parts of the Gospels that Dickens chose to emphasize and those he downplayed. Dickens focused on Jesus' moral message, his focus on mutual understanding, and love for the brother and care for the sick, poor and hated.

Dickens believed that Jesus' moral teaching should be followed in day-to-day life. However, the miraculous side of Jesus Christ is downplayed. For Charles Dickens, Jesus was primarily a great moral teacher to be imitated as a man. The book is effectively condensed, though the astute reader will notice a few errors, such as the claim that the Jews celebrated the Sabbath on Sunday and Dickens' confusion of Herodias and her daughter Salome.

The book is quite short, containing eleven short chapters. The first chapter covers the circumstances surrounding Christ's birth, the second his childhood and first miracle, and the third focuses on the selection of the apostles, the Lord's Prayer and the healing of the sick. Chapter four focuses on the Pharisees and John the Baptist, and chapter five discusses Mary Magdalene, the loaves and fishes incident and when Jesus walked on water. Chapter six contains the transfiguration, the laborers in the vineyard and the accused woman, and chapter seven relates the parables of the Good Samaritan and the prodigal son along with the story of the widow's mites.

Chapter eight explains Lazarus's resurrection, Jesus' trip into Jerusalem, the removal of the money-changers and the wickedness of Judas. Chapter nine includes the Last Supper, the garden of Gethsemane and Jesus' arrest; chapter ten has Peter's denial of Jesus, Judas's death, Pontius Pilate's judgment and Jesus' thorny crown. Chapter eleven brings the story to an end with the Christ's crucifixion, resurrection and ascension and the Acts of the Apostles and Saul's conversion. The book ends with some of Dickens's family prayers and a brief afterward.



# Introduction and Chapter One, Chapter Two, Chapter Three

## Introduction and Chapter One, Chapter Two, Chapter Three Summary and Analysis

Dickens begins *The Life of Our Lord* with a brief introduction where he explains to his audience of (presumably) children that he is eager to teach them about the life of Jesus Christ, who to Dickens was the best, kindest and gentlest person who ever lived, and that He is in heaven where all will meet after death. But, he argues, one cannot know how good heaven is unless they know about Jesus.

In chapter one, Dickens explains that Jesus was born two thousand years ago in Bethlehem. His parents lived in Nazareth but had to travel to Bethlehem for several reasons. Their names were Joseph and Mary. But due to a number of factors, when Joseph and Mary arrived, all the rooms and inns were full so they had to stay in a stable. Jesus was born in this stable, where Jesus was placed in a manger. When he was asleep, shepherds watching sheep saw God's angel who told them that a baby in Bethlehem was born that would be perfectly good and that God would love him as his own son. He will teach men to love one another and his name will be Jesus Christ. The angel then directed them to the stable, where they went.

Like London in England, Jerusalem was the great place in that land, and Jerusalem had a King named Herod. Some wise men came to Herod to tell him that they saw a star in the sky that signaled the birth of a special child in Bethlehem, to which Herod replied that he was jealous. The wise men then tried to find the child and met him with his mother Mary. They gave him presents and left but did not return to Herod. Then an angel came to Joseph and Mary and told them to take Jesus to Egypt to protect him from Herod. When Herod found out that the wise men had not returned to him, he became angry and sent his soldiers to kill the children less than two years of age. Herod thought Jesus was one of the children killed but he was wrong.

In chapter two, King Herod died and an angel told Joseph to go to Jerusalem, for Jesus was safe. But on the way, they heard that Herod's son was now king, so they left to live in Nazareth, where they lived until Jesus was twelve. One day Joseph and Mary went to Jerusalem for a religious feast at the Temple, a great church. They took Jesus, and when the feast ended, they left Jerusalem and went home with a large crowd to prevent themselves from being robbed and so did not notice they had left Jesus behind. When they returned to Jerusalem, they found him at the Temple talking about God's goodness to the teachers of the Bible at the time. Jesus astonished them. Then Jesus went with Joseph and Mary and lived in Nazareth until he was thirty or thirty-five.

At that time, a good man named John, the son of Elizabeth, Mary's cousin, had become a prophet. He went around the country teaching people to behave themselves. He



dressed in animal skins and ate locusts and wild honey and he baptized people in the river Jordan. Jesus went too and had John baptize him, though John resisted. But then God came down through a beautiful dove and told John that this Jesus was His son. Jesus then left and wandered in the wilderness without food for forty days and nights, praying to God.

After leaving the wilderness, Jesus began to cure sick people only by putting his hands on them, for God had given him the ability to heal the sick and to help the blind see. His first miracle was at Canan at a marriage-feast. The hosts had run out of wine, so Mary told him to turn water into wine and he did. God had given Jesus the ability to do wonders and he did them so people would believe what he taught them and that God sent him. Many believed and followed him.

In chapter three, Jesus Christ chose twelve poor men to follow him. These men came to be called apostles. This would help the poor to know that Heaven was for them, too. The twelve were Simon Peter, Andre, James the son of Zebedee, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Mathew, James the son of Alphaeus, Labbaeus, Simon, and Judas Iscariot (who betrayed Jesus). The first four were fishermen who Jesus offered to make "fishers of men". The disciples were always with him. Then great crowds came to follow him and Jesus taught them, among other things, how to pray. He cured a man of leprosy, another of palsy, and healed the servant of a centurion from far away. He also brought a magistrate's little girl back to life. Jesus was always merciful and tender and did good and taught people to love God and to hope for Heaven after death.

For this he is called Our Savior.



# Chapter Four, Chapter Five, Chapter Six, Chapter Seven

## Chapter Four, Chapter Five, Chapter Six, Chapter Seven Summary and Analysis

Jesus had opponents, proud men called Pharisees, who believed that only they were good. But they feared Jesus because he taught otherwise. While they were called 'the Jews', Jesus, the apostles, and most people around were themselves Jews as well. One day Jesus and his disciples gathered corn on the Sabbath and the Pharisees said that was wrong, as did they when Jesus healed a sick man with a withered hand on the Sabbath as well. Jesus thought men should always do good, no matter the day.

Jesus then went to Nain, along with many others. People brought the sick into the roads and asked for healing and they were healed. He then brought a man back from the dead. The crowds following him were so great that Jesus had to get in a boat and go into the water to rest. But on the ship, which his disciples were also on, a great storm came. The disciples and shipmen were afraid and Jesus woke up and calmed the winds. Then on the other side of the water they passed through a burial ground and met a dreadful madman who howled all day and night, making travelers afraid. He was full of demons and tormented by them. He called himself Legion to demonstrate the many demons that possessed him. Jesus liberated him and sent the demons into pigs who quickly ran off a steep place and died.

Herod, son of Herod, heard of Jesus' wonders and realized he was the companion of John the Baptist. Herod had taken John prisoner because he taught the people. When Herod was angry, his birthday came and his daughter, Herodias, a great dancer, danced in front of him and made him happy. He then swore that he would give her whatever she wanted. But then she asked for the head of John the Baptist, whom she hated. The king was sorry but had soldiers cut off his head anyway. When Jesus heard of this, he left the city after he and his disciples buried John's body.

In chapter five, a Pharisee asked Jesus to eat with him at his house. While eating, a woman who lived a bad and sinful life came in the house and trusted in Jesus' goodness and compassion. She dropped to her feet, wet her hair and then cleaned Jesus' feet with it. She was named Mary Magdalene. The Pharisee asked why Jesus allowed her to touch him in his mind and Jesus knew his thoughts. Jesus explained that forgiving this woman would bring her to love him and so he forgave her. The company present were in wonder that Jesus could forgive sins but God gave him the power.

Dickens then explains that children must learn from this that we must always forgive others when they ask and show repentance. And we must still forgive them if they do not. We must never hate them or be unkind to them because God forgives us.



Afterwards, a Jewish feast was held in Jerusalem and Jesus went there. He went by a place where sick and crippled people went and cured many of them. He healed one man who had been sick for thirty-eight years who could not wash in the water that Jesus used to cure people. Jesus healed him on the spot saying, "Take up thy bed and go away." The Jewish leaders saw this and hated Jesus because the people would not believe in them any longer so they decided that Jesus should be killed for violating the Sabbath and for calling himself the Son of God. So they organized against him. But the crowds still followed Jesus, seeing that he did nothing but good. One day, Jesus was sitting amongst the crowd on a hillside and took a few pieces of bread and a few fish and multiplied them so that all the people could eat. He fed five thousand with much left over.

Then Jesus sent the disciples across the water in a boat and stopped to pray. That night, while the disciples were in the boat, they wondered when Jesus would come. When the wind came and the waves were high they saw Jesus walking on water, which frightened the disciples.

Jesus did many more miracles after this and split loaves and fishes again. He then divided the disciples, sending them to many towns, teaching the people; he also gave them the power to cure. He predicted that he must one day return to Jerusalem where he would suffer and be killed, but on the third day, he claimed he would rise from the dead, ascend to Heaven and would sit at God's right hand convincing God to forgive sinners.

Chapter six begins six days after the second loaves and fish miracle. Jesus went up to a high mountain with only Peter, James and John. While talking to them, his face began to glow and his robes became like silver. A cloud overshadowed him and God said that this was his Son with whom He was pleased. This is called the 'transfiguration'.

After leaving the mountain, Jesus freed a boy from demons who the disciples could not cure. The disciples then asked who is the greatest in Heaven and Jesus said that those who are as humble as children enter Heaven. He told them that those who hurt children would suffer a terrible fate. The savior loved all children and the entire world. Peter then asked Jesus how often they should forgive. Jesus answered "seventy times seven times and more than that". He then told the parable of the master and servant. The master forgave the servant's debt, but later the servant refused to do the same for a fellow-servant. The master was furious for not extending the same forgiveness to his fellow-servant. The master then turned him away.

We must forgive others so that we are not hypocrites before God.

Jesus then tells the story of the farmer, his vineyard and the laborers when he paid the laborers different amounts for the same work. In this parable Jesus emphasizes that all, no matter how good or bad, have the opportunity to repent and go to Heaven. The Pharisees listening to him became angry and wished again to do him harm because of his goodness. One morning Jesus was sitting at the Mount of Olives, teaching the people, when a great noise was heard. The Pharisees then brought a woman who had



sinned, who the law said should be condemned to being stoned to death. They then asked Jesus what he thought. Jesus thought the law was wrong and Jesus said that he who is without sin should cast the first stone. All were ashamed and went away. The woman then begged Jesus for forgiveness and Jesus forgave her.

In chapter seven, a lawyer asked Jesus what man must do to be saved. Jesus said that he must love God with all his heart, soul and mind and strength and also to love one's neighbor as thyself. The lawyer then asked who his neighbor was, and Jesus told the story of the good Samaritan who helped a man who was robbed and left half dead. A priest passed him by, ignoring him, as did a Levite. But the Samaritan helped him. The Samaritan was a neighbor to the man.

Dickens draws the lesson that we must never be proud because before God we must all be humble. Only those who do not exalt themselves will be exalted by God.

Jesus then told a parable about a rich man who brought the poor, lame, maimed and blind to his house for dinner, which meant that those who are too busy to do good with their blessings will not find favor with him.

Then Jesus went to Jericho and saw a man in a tree named Zaccheus, who was a common man and sinner. Jesus invited him to eat with him and the Pharisees attacked him for eating with sinners. Then Jesus told the parable of the Prodigal Son. A man had two sons. The first asked for his inheritance and spent in on riotous living. When a famine came, the Prodigal Son fell into distress and went to his father and repented. His father forgave him. But the elder son who had been in the field was angry, thinking his father unjust and complaining of it to his father. He served his father and never received a feast. But his father responded that his son had always been with him. But they thought his brother was dead; he was lost but was found, and so it is natural to celebrate his return. In telling the parable, Jesus taught that those who do wrong are always welcome to return to God and will receive mercy if they are penitent.

The Pharisees hated these teachings, for they were rich and thought themselves superior to other men. Jesus then told a parable of a beggar who went to Heaven and a rich man who died and went to hell. The rich man was in torment and asking Lazarus for water to cool his tongue, but Abraham in heaven told him that in life he received good things and Lazarus evil, but now things are reversed. Jesus explains in this story that the Pharisees because of pride had already received their reward. Jesus would be merciful to those with humble hearts.

The Pharisees were angry and hired spies to ask Jesus questions to entrap him into saying something illegal. Caesar, the emperor, coined the money of the empire at the time and demanded tribute-money paid to him. They tried to get Jesus to say that paying Caesar tribute was unjust in order to incur Caesar's wrath; but if Jesus were to affirm Caesar's authority, then the Jews would no longer follow him. Jesus found a third way, explaining that we should render unto Caesar's what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's.





Then the Pharisees left, again enraged. Jesus knew their hearts and that they intended to kill him. As Jesus was teaching, he sat near the public treasury where people dropped money in a box for the poor. Many rich people put in much money but a poor widow gave more as a percentage of her income. Jesus praised the woman for giving more. The rich would not miss what they gave.

Dickens emphasizes that we must remember the widow when we think ourselves generous.



# Chapter Eight, Chapter Nine, Chapter Ten, Chapter Eleven

## Chapter Eight, Chapter Nine, Chapter Ten, Chapter Eleven Summary and Analysis

Lazarus of Bethany, the brother of Mary Magdalene and her sister Martha, was very ill. Martha sent for Jesus but he did not come for two days. Lazarus died in the meanwhile, and Martha and Mary were very sad. Martha was upset with Jesus, though she knew he would be resurrected on the last day. Jesus proclaimed that He was the Resurrection and the Life and then had them take him to Lazarus's tomb. Jesus raised him from the dead and many believed in Jesus. But the Pharisees resolved to kill Jesus if he came to Jerusalem before Passover.

That night, Jesus, Lazarus, Mary and the disciples had a meal. Mary used her (quite rare) oil to anoint Jesus' feet and Judas complained that it was not sold to the poor. But he was merely upset because he had not gotten the money for himself and began to plot betraying Jesus. Passover drew near and Jesus went near Jerusalem. Before entering, Jesus had the disciples find an ass that he could ride on to enter Jerusalem. When he entered, a large crowd gathered around him and praised him. He then went to the tables and cast the money-changers out. He then healed the blind and the lame and the Pharisees hated him. That night, Jesus took water and washed the feet of others and Peter objected. But Jesus reminded him that he did this to teach others to be kind and gentle. Jesus then says that one of the disciples will betray him. Judas left immediately to the chief priests and they agreed to give him thirty pieces of silver if he gave Jesus to them.

In chapter nine, the Passover Feast drew near. Jesus had Peter and John secure a place for them to eat supper. They sat down to dinner to what came to be called the "Last Supper", because Jesus would not again eat and drink with the disciples before he died. Jesus took bread from the table, blessed and broke it and gave it to them and then did the same with the wine, telling them to do this in the future in "remembrance of me". After supper they went to the Mount of Olives and Jesus told him he would be captured that night and that they would leave him alone and fend for themselves. Peter denied this but Jesus told him that before morning he would deny Jesus three times. Peter denied this.

Jesus then went to the garden called Gethsemane with three of the disciples and then went to one part alone. He told them to watch while he went to pray and rest. Jesus was frightened and distressed and prayed to God that if there was any way to avoid his being killed for God to bring it about, but that he would do God's will anyway. He cried to God, but after praying, he was comforted and took the disciples to wait. Judas then brought a strong guard of men from the Pharisees to seize Jesus. They had swords and torches. When they arrived, Jesus exposed Judas as the traitor. The guards seized



Jesus and only Peter tried to protect him. He drew a sword and cut off the right ear of a servant of the high priest named Malchus. But Jesus told Peter to withdraw his sword and restored the man's ear. When Jesus was taken away not one went with him.

In chapter ten, Peter and another disciple secretly followed the guard to the high priest Caiaphas's house where Jesus was and where the scribes would question him. On the way, people asked if Peter was one of Jesus' disciples. Out of fear he denied Jesus three times, then realized it when the cock crowed and cried bitterly.

Jesus was questioned by the scribes and Caiaphas asked him what he taught. Jesus did not answer accusations made against him, but the scribes and priests decided that he blasphemed and should be killed. Then they beat him and spit on him. When Judas saw this, he was horrified, returned the silver, rushed away and hung himself. Jesus was then taken to the Judgment Hall where the Roman Governor of the area, Pontius Pilate, had to administer justice. He was not a Jew and told the priests to determine his punishment according to their own law. Only Herod had the right to engage in certain punishments in Galilee, however, so the priests pressed him. They then took Jesus to Herod; his men laughed at Jesus and dressed him in a fine robe, sending him back to Pilate. Pilate then called the priests and said he found no wrong in him. But the priests wanted him killed.

Pilate was worried that so many clamored against Jesus. Because at the feast of Passover there was a custom of releasing a prisoner to the people, Pilate tried to get the Jews to have Jesus released. But they declined. Instead the crowd asked for Barabbas, an evil criminal, to be freed. Because Pilate saw the Jews' determination, he gave him to his soldiers to be scourge or beaten. They made a crown of thorns for him, dressed him in a purple robe, spat on him, struck him, mocked him and whipped him. Jesus bore it and prayed for them. When Pilate saw that the Jews desired to crucify him, Pilate washed his hands of the whole affair and delivered Jesus to them to be crucified.

In chapter eleven, Dickens explains to his young audience what it means to be crucified, how it involves being nailed to a cross and left to die. Jesus was forced to bear a cross on his shoulder like a common criminal. Jesus then was forced out of Jerusalem to Golgotha, the place of the skull. On a hill called Calvary, Jesus was nailed to the cross and placed next to criminals.

A guard of four soldiers divided Jesus' things and cast lots of his coat. They talked while he died, and offered vinegar to him mixed with gall and wine mixed with myrrh but he rejected it. The wicked mocked him that if he were God's son, he would come down. The chief priests mocked him too. One of the thieves on the cross begged Jesus to save them all. But the other thief repented his sins and asked to be remembered when Jesus went to Paradise. Jesus told him that that very day, the 'thief on the cross' would join him in Paradise.

No one took pity on him there save John and four women, Mary mother of Jesus, her sister, Mary wife of Cleophas and Mary Magdalene. Jesus told John to care for Mary



when he died. At the sixth hour, darkness came over the land for three hours when Jesus cried out "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me!" Then the soldiers gave him more vinegar. He then received it and proclaimed "It is finished" and commended his spirit to God and died. The guard was terrified and proclaimed that surely this was God's son. Those who watched from afar beat their breasts and went home distraught.

The next day, the Sabbath, the Jews had Pilate send soldiers to take down the body. They pierced Jesus' side with a spear to make sure he was dead and water and blood came from his side. A good man, Joseph of Arimathea, a believer in Christ, begged Pilate for the body. Pilate allowed it and Joseph and Nicodemus wrapped Jesus' body in linen and spices, as was customary and placed his body in a tomb cut in rock. They then rolled a stone over its mouth and left Mary Magdalene and another Mary to watch it. The Pharisees recalled Jesus saying that he would rise from the dead on the third day after he died, so they went to Pilate and had him send soldiers to guard the tomb so that Jesus' disciples would not take the body. Pilate agreed and the stone was sealed up.

At dawn, the two Mary's and some other women came to the sepulcher with spices and wondered how they would roll away the stone. But the earth trembled and an angel came and rolled it back and rested on it. He looked of lightning with white garments and the men of the guard fainted with fear. Mary Magdalene saw the stone rolled away and ran to Peter and John who were on their way. She said that they had taken Jesus away so the three ran to the tomb. John outran them and looked in, seeing the linen clothes lying there. He did not go in. Peter saw the same. Then they went home to tell others. But Mary remained outside and wept. After a time she looked in and saw two angels; they asked her why she cried. She said that she cried because they took away her Lord and she did not know where she was. But as she answered, she saw Jesus behind her yet did not recognize him. He asked why she cried and Mary thought he was a gardener and asked him where her Lord was if he took her away.

Jesus then said Mary's name and she recognized him and was started. Mary then went and told the disciples that she saw Jesus. The women also said they had seen the two men and had left. They had also seen Christ on the way and worshipped him but the apostles did not believe them. The soldiers told the chief priests the same but were given money to keep silent and were told to claim that the disciples stole the body while they slept.

But on the same day, Simon and Cleopas—Simon one of the apostles and Celopas another follower of Jesus, walked to Emmaus, a short distance from Jerusalem. As they talked, a stranger joined them and explained the scriptures to them and told them about God. They wondered who he was and asked the stranger to stay with them. When they sat down to supper, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it. They then found Jesus' face changed and recognized him. But as they looked at him, he vanished.

Simon and Cleopas immediately went back to Jerusalem and told the disciples what they saw. Then Jesus appeared to them all and they were frightened. He showed them his hands and feet, which still had their wounds. He told them to touch them to help



them believe. And then he ate some fish and honeycomb before them. But Thomas, one of the apostles, was not there and said he would not believe, save when he sees Jesus' hands and put his hand in Jesus' side. But then Jesus appeared to him and let him do just that. Thomas worshipped him, but Jesus said that more blessed were those who had faith.

Afterwards, five hundred followers of Jesus saw him at once and he stayed with others for forty days, teaching them and telling them to go out to the world and preach his gospel ignoring what the wicked would do to them. He then took the disciples out of Jerusalem to Bethany, blessed them and ascended on a cloud to Heaven, taking his place at God's right hand. The disciples simply saw Jesus disappear and then two white-robed angels appeared and told them that just as Christ ascended so he would one day return to judge the world.

When Christ had vanished, the apostles started to teach the people as Jesus' commanded. They chose Matthias to replace Judas and went to many countries, baptizing and forgiving people by Christ's power. The disciples healed the sick, gave the blind their sight and much more. They were persecuted and treated badly by many, including Saul, who had many Christians killed. But God spoke to Saul and changed his heart on the road to Damascus. He blinded Saul for three days and he did not eat or drink. Then a Christian was sent by an angel to him and restored his sight in Christ's name. He then became a great Christian and preached and taught and believed. The disciples and other followers of Jesus started to call themselves Christians and carried the cross as their sign. The Christian religion was a true and good one and the priests of old religions could not keep their flocks from it and had many Christians killed and martyred. But nothing would silence the Christians; they knew that if they did their duty they would go to Heaven. Over the centuries Christianity came to be known as the greatest religion in the world.

In a brief epilogue at the end of chapter eleven, Dickens reminds the children that it is Christianity to always do good even to those who hurt us. Christianity says to serve our neighbors and love them and treat others as we would have them treat us. We should be gentle, merciful and not boast of our virtue or our prayers or love of God but show that we love Jesus by humbly doing good. If we do this and remember Christ's lessons we can confidently believe that God will forgive us and help us to live and die in peace. The contemporary editors of the book then include Dickens' family prayers, a prayer for children and a brief afterward not part of the original work.



# Characters

## Charles Dickens

Charles Dickens (1812-1870), the author, was the most popular English writer of the mid-nineteenth century and among history's greatest writers. While many of his novels are considered literary classics, these novels were often published in serialized form, much like comic books are today. The books therefore developed a young and excited audience for whom Dickens became an able communicator. Dickens' most famous works are *Oliver Twist*, *A Christmas Carol*, *David Copperfield*, *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Great Expectations*. *The Life of Our Lord*, however, was not intended to be part of the historical Dickens canon.

*The Life of Our Lord* was written by Dickens for his children's theological and ethical education. The book, composed in 1846, is a brief condensation of the Gospels of the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Dickens's writing is clear and aimed at simplifying the often important subtleties and complexities of the Gospels for the young minds of his readers. While Dickens's condensation of the Gospels is effective, a perfect summary is impossible given the short nature of Dickens's format. Different events must be emphasized and others downplayed along with other events and teachings simplified to a significant degree.

It says a lot about Dickens the choices he made with respect to emphasis. As was becoming common among English elites in the nineteenth century, Dickens tends to emphasize Jesus' moral teachings rather than his more miraculous and theological aspects. While miracles are discussed, the claims of Jesus to divinity are ignored or reinterpreted. This indicates that Dickens thinks it is more important to understand Jesus' moral teachings rather than, say, the need to believe in Christ for the forgiveness of sins.

## Jesus Christ

Jesus Christ (5 BC-30AD) was (and for Christians, is) the founder of the Christian religion. Jesus was born to Mary and Joseph, two poor Jews, after, following the Gospel accounts, Mary and Joseph told that a child would be born to Mary from the Holy Spirit who would redeem the people from their sins. Jesus' birth is said to be miraculous and occurred in the lowliest of circumstances, as Jesus was famously born in a manger in a stable at an inn that was full at the time. Little is known about Jesus' childhood, save that he was precocious, arguing with the teachers at the Jewish temple about theology and scripture at an early age. Jesus' first miracle occurred at the wedding feast at Cana when per Mary's request, Jesus turned water into wine.

The events of Jesus' life are well-known, and perhaps intimately known to many readers. The miracles, parables, moral teachings, sufferings, death, resurrection and



ascension of Jesus are matters deeply embedded in Western culture, and in fact most others. But different cultures emphasize different aspects of Jesus' life and death. In *The Life of Our Lord*, the reader will notice that Dickens's Jesus is a great moral teacher who is not clearly divine. Instead, he was primarily a man of important and revolutionary moral insight. Jesus believed in helping the poor, in treating all as they would have themselves be treated, in total forgiveness for trespass, of love for the neighbor and in serving God with total dedication. Dickens is particularly impressed that Jesus taught forgiveness, tenderness, peace and charity.

## **Mary, Mother of God**

Mary, Jesus' mother, is said to be the mother of God who gave birth to Jesus while still a virgin.

## **John the Baptist**

Jesus' cousin who preached his coming and baptized people in his name before being killed by Herod.

## **Simon Peter**

The most prominent of the Apostles, Simon Peter was Jesus' greatest defender and famously denied him three times.

## **John the Apostle**

The 'disciple who Jesus loved' who does not mention his name in his own account of Jesus' life, John was present at Jesus' crucifixion and was charged by Jesus with Mary's care.

## **Judas Iscariot**

The apostle for famously betrayed Jesus with a kiss and for silver who killed himself afterward.

## **The Pharisees**

The ruling party of the Jewish people in Jerusalem who were threatened by Jesus' teaching and popularity.



## **Pontius Pilate**

The local prefect of Jerusalem representing the Roman Empire. The Pharisees tried to involve Pilate in the crucifixion of Jesus, which he resisted.

## **Saul of Tarsus**

A famous rabbi and fierce persecutor of early Christians who Jesus is said to have blinded for three days and converted directly to Christianity, becoming the thirteenth apostle 'untimely born'.

## **God**

The traditional creator being of the three major monotheistic religions, Jesus is said to be both God's son and identical with God.

## **Mary Magdalene**

A prostitute who Jesus forgave; out of love, she followed him his entire life and through his death.





# Objects/Places

## Bethlehem

The small town in Israel where Jesus Christ was born in a manger.

## Nazareth

Jesus' home town.

## Jerusalem

The main city of Jerusalem where Jesus spent much of his time at many points in his life and where he was crucified.

## The Temple

The temple in Jerusalem was the holiest place in the world for Jews. Jesus often taught there and challenged the Pharisees in that area. He also cast the money changers out of the Temple.

## Gethsemane

The garden where Jesus prayed for God to spare him and where he was arrested.

## The Miracle at Cana

Jesus' first miracle where he turned water into wine.

## The Lord's Prayer

The short prayer Jesus taught to his disciples.

## The Loaves and Fishers

The name of the miracle where Jesus multiplied a few loaves and fishes to feed thousands.



## **The Tomb**

The sepulcher where Jesus was buried and embalmed and from where he is said to have resurrected.

## **The Last Supper**

The last meal Jesus ate with the Apostles and where he instituted communion, according to many Christian denominations.

## **The Crown of Thorns**

The crown made of thorns to mock Jesus for the claim that he was king of the Jews.

## **Crucifixion**

One form of execution employed by the Romans where an individual's hands and feet are nailed to a cross and the person is left to die. Jesus was crucified.

## **Resurrection**

After Jesus' crucifixion he is said to have risen from the dead on the third day.

## **Ascension**

Forty days following his resurrection, Jesus ascended into heaven.

## **Saul on the Road to Damascus**

Saul, after much persecution of the followers of Jesus, was struck down by God on the Road to Damascus.



# Themes

## Compassion

Charles Dickens uses *The Life of Our Lord* to demonstrate the extraordinary and heroic virtues of Jesus Christ. However, some of these virtues are more important to Dickens than others. For instance, Dickens often praises Jesus for his tenderness and unusual kindness and argues that no greater man ever lived. Dickens is most impressed by the compassion demonstrated by Jesus, and seeks to bring out this virtue. First, Dickens emphasizes Jesus' teachings about compassion, such as his teaching that human beings are to love their neighbors as themselves. He points out Jesus' teachings that the poor deserve the help of the better off. And he argues that the widow who gave a larger percentage of her smaller income to the poor was more blessed than those who gave more but had more and so missed it less.

Jesus' acts of compassion are highlighted as well. For instance, while Mary Magdalene is a more minor character in the Gospels themselves, she is more prominently displayed in *The Life of Our Lord*. Mary Magdalene was forgiven by Jesus for prostitution and she loved him very dearly, reforming her behavior and following him everywhere, even to his crucifixion and focused on embalming his body. Dickens is very impressed that Jesus associated with a woman who was ostracized by others for an embarrassing impropriety. This was perhaps worth Dickens's emphasis during the notoriously unforgiving sexual fastidiousness of the Victorians.

## Lessons for Children

*The Life of Our Lord* was never intended for publication. It was written in 1846 for Dickens's children for their theological and ethical instruction. However, the book was published long after Dickens's death in 1871 and because it was written for Dickens's children, it was written with a child audience in mind. Thus, the book still contains important lessons for children generally, not merely for Dickens's children.

The major lessons for children are the simplified versions of Jesus' moral teachings. This is not to say that Jesus' moral teachings were complex, but many of the harder to understand teachings, such as the Beatitudes, are not emphasized. Instead, Dickens focuses on always being forgiving and being nice. He hones in on loving one another, sacrificing for others' good and caring for and defending the poor and weak. Dickens also reemphasizes the lessons of the Gospels in simple terms for children.

As he says at the end of the book, "Remember! It is Christianity to do good always—even to those who do evil to us." For Dickens, Christianity just is good behavior. He emphasizes that it centrally requires that we love our neighbor, do good to others, be gentle, forgiving and not to boast about one's good qualities. If we are good, then we might believe that God will forgive our own sins and help us to 'live and die in peace'.

## The Miraculous and Its Point

This guide has already emphasized that Dickens emphasizes some aspects of Jesus' life and teachings over others. In the Victorian Era, one of increasingly secularism among British elites, the miraculous aspects of Jesus' life tended to be emphasized by the poorer working classes and the moral teachings by the upper classes in England. Jesus' miraculous aspects were something of an embarrassment in an increasingly scientific age. Dickens may well have been influenced by this trend as he emphasizes Jesus' moral teachings over his spiritual teachings and activities. In fact, at one point in the book, Dickens even claims that the reason God gave Jesus the ability to do 'wonders' was in order to show that he was a good man and that his teachings about human morality were true.

As stated in the previous theme, Dickens simply identifies Christianity with doing good. And if we are good, we can hope that God will forgive us. But traditional Christianity often emphasizes that men are not capable of doing good from a true heart without already having faith in God, that men are naturally sinful and often need direct divine intervention to recognize God's plan for salvation, and that while human goodness is demanded by God, faith and supernatural goodness is demanded even more. Further, many Christian denominations emphasize the importance of sacraments, liturgy and other traditional aspects of church life, whereas these elements are totally absent from Dickens' conception of Christianity.



# Style

## Perspective

Charles Dickens was one of England's greatest writers. One reason for his continued fame was his ability to capture English culture in his novels and characters during the Victorian Era and in earlier periods. For instance, Dickens is among the most potent critics of Victorian Era capitalism, pointing out how, in his view, English capitalism created vast differences between the material means of rich and poor and how many of the poor lived in terrible conditions and working conditions. The images of smoke, suit, children endangered in factory labor, the mistreatment of children in orphanages and the like are a permanent part of the Western psyche.

In many ways, Dickens was a precursor to British and American progressives, who not only emphasized the importance of the state in protecting the weak from private sources of power but also put forth a more serious and secular perspective on the world that dismissed belief in miracles as silly and primitive while emphasizing some of Jesus' moral teachings as the most important moral ideas in life.

This perspective comes out strongly in *The Life of Our Lord*. Dickens acknowledges Jesus' miracles and thought the New Testament to be the greatest of all books. But the reader should be aware that Dickens has a tendency to make the miraculous and theological in Jesus' life serve the moral teachings and actions of Jesus. This emphasis is at variance with those of many, if not most followers of Jesus and displays the particularities of Dickens's time and personal attitudes.

## Tone

The tone of the *Life of Our Lord* combines that of a children's book meant to teach moral lessons and a catechism. First, the ordinary tone of a children's book is simple, clear, kind and parental. It is simple in that the sentences and paragraphs are simple, as is the content of those sentences and paragraphs, making them easy to comprehend for young minds and young readers. They must be clear for this reason as well. Children's books rarely have negative tones, even when presenting negative or sad events or information. Sometimes such books condemn 'bad' or 'wicked' people and even get scary, but they avoid a certain sort of negativity present in adult books.

In the same way, the tone tends to be kind and understanding. It is parental in this way, in that it often speaks to a child as a parent would, not a friend. *The Life of Our Lord* is no exception to this rule.

However, because the book is about Jesus, who is the savior of the largest religion in the world, Christianity, the book has a religious tone as well. It speaks about God and Jesus, praises Jesus highly, speaks of his miracles and his resurrection from the dead. It promises heaven to those who do good and speaks about life after death. It is also



doctrinal, teaching that the teachings of Jesus are to be followed as hard and fast moral rules.

## Structure

The Life of Our Lord is a children's book, and as such it has a short, simple structure. First, the book contains some brief notes on the text, along with a foreword from the editor and from Dickens. The 1934 edition contains a number of illustrations not included in Dickens's original copy of the book, so The Life of Our Lord has a number of those drawings in its more current edition as well.

The book has eleven chapters that group the events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection from each of the four Christian gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, into eleven stages. Chapter one covers the back story to Jesus' birth, such as Mary's pregnancy and her and Joseph's trip to Bethlehem. The second chapter discusses Jesus' childhood, including his discussion with the chief priests in Jerusalem. It talks about John the Baptist and Jesus' first miracle. Chapter three introduces the twelve apostles. It talks about the Lord's Prayer and recounts Jesus' miraculous healings. Chapter four explains who the Pharisees were and their hatred of Jesus, discusses more miracles and chronicles the death of John the Baptist.

Chapter five covers Mary Magdalen, Bethesda, the loaves and fishes miracle and Jesus' miraculous walking on water, and chapter six reviews the transfiguration, the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, and other matters. Chapter seven reviews the parables of the good Samaritan and the prodigal son and chapter eight depicts Lazarus's resurrection, Jesus' entrance in Jerusalem and the conspiracy of Judas. Chapter nine recounts the Last Supper, Jesus' betrayal and his arrest. Chapter ten explains how Peter denied Christ and how Judas died along with Pilate's judgment. And chapter eleven depicts the crucifixion, the resurrection, the ascension, the acts of the apostles and Saul's conversion.



## Quotes

"I am very anxious that you should know something about the history of Jesus Christ. For everybody ought to know about him. No one ever lived, who was so good, so kind, so gentle, and so sorry for all people who did wrong, or were in any way ill or miserable, as he was."

Introduction, p. 15

"[Jesus] was born a long long time ago—nearly two thousand years ago—at a place called Bethlehem."

Chap. 1, p. 17

"King Herod hoped that Jesus Christ was one of them. But he was not, as you know, for he had escaped safely into Egypt. And he lived there, with his father and mother, until bad King Herod died."

Chap. 1, p. 20

"This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!"

Chap. 2, p. 23

"Jesus Christ chose twelve poor men to be his companions. These twelve are called the apostles or disciples, and he chose them from among poor men, in order that the poor might know—always after that, in all years to come—that Heaven was made for them as well as for the rich, and that God makes no difference between those who wear good clothes and those who go barefoot and in rags."

Chap. 3, p. 26

"She is not dead. She is asleep."

Chap. 3, p. 30

"The father, give me the head of John the Baptist in a charger."

Chap. 4, p. 35

"Take up thy bed and go away."

Chap. 5, p. 37

"This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Hear ye him!"

Chap. 6, p. 41

"He that is without sin among you, let him throw the first stone at her."

Chap. 6, p. 45

"Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's."

Chap. 7, p. 51

"I am the Resurrection and the Life."

Chap. 8, p. 54



"Do this in remembrance of me!"

Chap. 9, p. 59

"Forgive them! They know not what they do!"

Chap. 10, p. 67

"It is finished! Father! Into thy hands I commend my Spirit!"

Chap. 11, p. 69

"Woman, why weepest thou?"

Chap. 11, p. 72

"Saul, Saul, why persecutes thou me!"

Chap. 11, p. 76

"So thousands upon thousands of Christians sprung up and taught the people and were cruelly killed, and were succeeded by other Christians, until the religion gradually became the great religion of the world."

Chap. 11, p. 77



## Topics for Discussion

Why did Charles Dickens write *The Life of Our Lord*? Who did he write it for?

What aspects of Jesus' life does Dickens emphasize? Why?

What aspects of Jesus' life does Dickens downplay? Why?

Pick two of Jesus' teachings that Dickens thinks are most important. Defend your choices.

Why, on Dickens's view, did God give Jesus the power to do miracles?

In what sense is Jesus Christ the Savior of humanity for Dickens?

What do you think the fact that Dickens downplays the role of Jesus' miracles in the Gospels indicates about Dickens's beliefs? Defend your answer.