

Jacqueline Bisset

An Old-Fashioned THANKSGIVING

Based on the short story by Louisa May Alcott,
the author of *Little Women*



STUDY GUIDE

CREW OVERVIEW

Graeme Campbell (Director)

Shelley Evans (Writing Credit: screenplay)

Louisa May Alcott (Writing Credit: short story)

CAST OVERVIEW

Jacqueline Bisset (Isabella Caldwell)

Hélène Joy (Mary Bassett)

Tatiana Maslany (Mathilda “Tilly” Bassett)

Kris Turner (Gideon “Gad” Hopkins)

USING THIS DISCUSSION GUIDE

Intended for use after viewing the film, this study guide provides catalysts for biblically-based discussion of various themes found in *An Old-Fashioned Thanksgiving*. The guide features three themes from the movie and is structured in such a way that groups can choose to discuss the entire guide at once or can focus on one or two themes at a time.

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FILM OVERVIEW/NOTE TO GROUP

Set in post-Civil War New Hampshire and based on Louisa May Alcott's short story of the same name, *An Old-Fashioned Thanksgiving* is a coming-of-age narrative about the power of healing, the definition of wealth and the nature of charity. At the story's center is the Bassett family, recovering from the recent and premature death of Ellis Bassett, a beloved husband and father. Without Mr. Bassett, the family farm has deteriorated, and Mary Bassett (played by H  l  ne Joy) struggles to make rent and provide necessities for her children and a neighboring family.

With growing concern, free-spirited Tilly (Tatiana Maslany), our narrator and the eldest of the Bassett children, uses her literary inclinations and writes a letter to her wealthy, but estranged, grandmother, Isabella Caldwell (Jacqueline Bisset). In the letter, she poses as her mother, exaggerating the Bassett family's circumstances and requesting Mrs. Caldwell's immediate assistance. Unable to ignore the dramatic nature of the letter, Isabella arrives in the small New Hampshire town just before Thanksgiving, much to Mary's, and Tilly's, immense surprise.

Isabella's visit brings with it several deep-seated conflicts between herself and her daughter, and Tilly begins to understand why her mother has never called on Isabella for aid. In addition to an unresolved rift concerning Ellis Bassett, Isabella and Mary have differing opinions on the value of money, the importance of virtue and the proper method of child-rearing. These conflicts surface almost immediately following Isabella and Mary's strained reunion, and it isn't until Tilly admits to writing the fabricated letter that Isabella's stay begins to take on a different tone.

(Warning – spoilers mentioned below.)

During Isabella's visit, she takes great pleasure in Tilly, bestowing her with new dresses, fine foods, and other material and social pleasures, despite Mary's wishes that her children learn to live within their means. Even though Tilly enjoys her grandmother's lavishness, she struggles to understand the true meaning of wealth amidst the landscape of her upbringing, one in which she's watched her mother faithfully invest in friends and family, no matter the personal cost.

Tilly's uncertainty, enhanced by an offer of marriage from a childhood friend, Gad Hopkins (Kris Turner), reaches its peak when Mary contracts scarlet fever. As the family members agonizingly wait for Mary's condition to improve, the frustration that was once so embedded in their relationships seems suddenly petty and unnecessary. When Mary eventually begins to recuperate, she and Isabella make amends. Mary's recovery coincides with a beautiful Thanksgiving dinner, after which Mary tells Tilly and Gad that she will give her blessing on their union once Tilly has traveled with her grandmother and gained some invaluable life experiences.

THE PROCESS OF RECONCILIATION

guiding scripture: Colossians 3:13 (NLT): “Make allowance for each other’s faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others.”

SCRIPTURES REFERENCED

- Psalm 86:5 (NLT): “O Lord, you are so good, so ready to forgive, so full of unfailing love for all who ask for your help.”
- Proverbs 17:9 (NIV): “He who covers an offense promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends.”
- Matthew 6:14 (NLT): “If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you.”
- Matthew 7:3–5 (NIV): “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”
- Romans 12:17–18 (NIV): “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”
- Romans 14:19 (NIV): “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.”
- Colossians 3:13 (NLT): “Make allowance for each other’s faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others.”
- Hebrews 8:12 (NIV): “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”
- Hebrews 12:14 (NIV): “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.”



- 1 Peter 3:11 (NLT): “Turn away from evil and do good. Search for peace, and work to maintain it.”
- 1 Peter 4:8 (NIV): “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.”

DVD SCENES TO REVIEW

- The Hopkinsons’ Party (00:40:31–00:42:14, Chapter 9)
- Collected Pedigree (00:52:50–00:58:05, Chapter 12)
- An Explanation (01:07:11–01:08:19, Chapter 14)
- Forgiveness (01:15:30–01:16:42, Chapter 16)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Whether it takes moments, days, months, or years, the process of reconciliation is just that—a process. The journey itself often embodies countless emotions, ranging from anger to indifference and frustration to hope. In Isabella and Mary’s case, the years of detachment and silence quickly fade into restrained civilities upon their initial reunion, and those civilities in turn fade into anger and frustration. In order to appreciate their reconciliation on the whole, it’s important to examine some of the steps in their journey toward healing.

SCENE TO REVIEW

THE HOPKINSES’ PARTY (00:40:31–00:42:14, CHAPTER 9)

- What does Isabella and Mary’s exchange reveal about their long-time feud? What issues are at the heart of their differences?
- What place does this argument have in the overall process of reconciliation? Why might the argument be a “necessary evil,” so to speak?

Read Proverbs 17:9 (see Scriptures Referenced)

- How does repeating the matter separate close friends? Is this what Isabella and Mary are doing? Why or why not?

Isabella and Mary’s conflict reaches its worst moment when Mary finds out that her mother has meddled in her affairs and purchased the Bassett farm. What follows is an explosive confrontation. Yet, after the altercation, the mother and daughter seem to arrive at a cease-fire.



SCENE TO REVIEW

COLLECTED PEDIGREE (00:52:50–00:58:05, CHAPTER 12)

- Isabella and Mary have had several arguments prior to this one, but what makes this confrontation unique? How is it important to the process of reconciliation?
- What do we learn about Isabella's history? Does Mary have a right to be angry with her mother? Why or why not?
- How does Isabella and Mary's conflict affect others? In particular, how does the fight impact Tilly? How does Tilly respond?
- Toward the end of the scene, Mary comes home from searching for Tilly, and she and Isabella have a genuinely civil conversation. Why the change?

Take a moment to read and consider the overall message in Romans 12:17–18; 14:19; and Hebrews 12:14 (see Scriptures Referenced).

- What do these verses have in common? What's at the heart of their message? What connection do these verses have with the theme of reconciliation?
- At what point in the movie do we begin to see evidence of these verses? Can you point to specific scenes or lines of dialogue?

One of the most important aspects of reconciliation is personal responsibility. In Matthew 7:3–5 (see Scriptures Referenced), in a part of the Sermon on the Mount, Christ speaks about the importance of owning up to our own culpability before condemning or judging others. Similarly, Isabella finally takes responsibility for her actions in a brief, but vital, conversation with Tilly.

SCENE TO REVIEW

AN EXPLANATION (01:07:11–01:08:19, CHAPTER 14)

- What does this confession say about Isabella's changing attitude? What events have prompted her to take responsibility for her actions in her conflict with Mary?
- At one point, Isabella admits that she had justified her previous behavior by telling herself that the situation with Mary could not have been helped. What does it mean for Isabella to make this admission?
- What does the confession mean to and for Tilly? How does Isabella's admission force Tilly to think about her own relationship with Mary and some of the reconciliation that needs to take place between the two of them?
- In your opinion, where does personal responsibility (and the act of confession or admission) fit on the spectrum of reconciliation?

Colossians 3:13 and 1 Peter 3:11 (see Scriptures Referenced) contain instructions for approaching forgiveness and acquiring peace.

- How do the verses relate to reconciliation? How are forgiveness and healing crucial aspects of the reconciliation process?

Mary's illness puts things in perspective for several characters, including Tilly and Isabella. Tilly realizes that she's acted in an ungrateful manner where her mother is concerned, and Isabella realizes that she may lose her only child. In a very tender scene toward the end of the movie, Isabella and Mary finally find the healing that has long eluded them.

SCENE TO REVIEW

FORGIVENESS (01:15:30–01:16:42, CHAPTER 16)

- What do you think about this moment of reconciliation?
- Mary shares her memories about leaving home and losing Ellis. What purpose do these memories serve? How do they function in the reconciliation?

Read Psalm 86:5, Matthew 6:14 and Hebrews 8:12 (see Scriptures Referenced).

- What do these verses say about the nature of forgiveness? About God's view of forgiveness? About our call to forgive?

As you conclude this theme discussion, consider the following questions:

- Isabella and Mary's conflict is central to the story. However, there are other conflicts in the story that work toward reconciliation, too. What other relationships or situations undergo healing as the story unfolds?
- In what ways does the concept of reconciliation impact Tilly? Since she's the narrator, it's important to analyze her growth and change in light of this theme.
- Read 1 Peter 4:8 (see Scriptures Referenced). How does this verse address the theme of reconciliation? What other verses apply to this theme discussion?



THE DEFINITION OF WEALTH

guiding scripture: Jeremiah 9:23–24 (NIV): “This is what the Lord says: ‘Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,’ declares the Lord.”

SCRIPTURES REFERENCED

- Psalm 62:10 (NIV): “...though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them.”
- Proverbs 10:22 (NIV): “The blessing of the Lord brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it.”
- Proverbs 15:16 (NLT): “Better to have little, with fear for the Lord, than to have great treasure and inner turmoil.”
- Proverbs 22:4 (NIV): “Humility and the fear of the Lord bring wealth and honor and life.”
- Jeremiah 9:23–24 (NIV): “This is what the Lord says: ‘Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,’ declares the Lord.”
- Matthew 6:19–21 (NIV): “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”
- 2 Corinthians 8:9 (NLT): “You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich.”
- Philippians 4:19 (KJV): “But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.”
- 1 Timothy 6:10 (NIV): “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”



- 1 Timothy 6:17–19 (NIV): “Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.”

DVD SCENES TO REVIEW

- A Heated Discussion (00:21:36–00:24:41, Chapter 5)
- Shopping Expedition (00:43:23–00:46:23, Chapter 9)
- A Story (01:00:24–01:03:18, Chapter 13)
- Memories of Ellis (00:28:20–00:30:59, Chapter 6)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Wealth means something different to everyone. For Mary Bassett, wealth is found in virtue and family. For Tilly, wealth abounds in memories and possibilities. For Isabella, wealth means ample material possessions. For Mr. and Mrs. Hopkins, wealth is a sign of great status, though their personal fortune is a lonely companion after the loss of three sons.

One of Isabella and Mary’s first arguments lays the groundwork for a greater understanding of each woman’s definition of wealth. It’s clear that their definitions are of the differing variety.

SCENE TO REVIEW

A HEATED DISCUSSION (00:21:36–00:24:41, CHAPTER 5)

- How does Mary’s explanation of Abel Yule demonstrate her definition of wealth?
- Isabella says, “Your love of virtue renders you somewhat insensible to the realities of your situation.” What does she mean? Is she correct? Why or why not?
- If you were to describe the worldviews of Isabella and Mary, how would you do so? In what do they place their faith? Where do they find security?
- Is either Isabella’s or Mary’s definition of wealth completely accurate? Is either completely inaccurate? Discuss your own definition of wealth, too.

Wealth can be a tricky concept. On one hand, God uses wealth as a tangible means of showing his blessing on the faithful and obedient—consider the likes of Abraham, Job, and David (consider, too, verses such as Proverbs 10:22 and 22:4 [see Scriptures Referenced]). On the other hand, the Bible warns repeatedly of the dangers of the allure of wealth and our capacity for prioritizing it, for finding our joy in riches rather than in God the Father.

Take some time to read Psalm 62:10, Proverbs 15:16, Matthew 6:19–21, and 1 Timothy 6:10 (see Scriptures Referenced).

- What caution do these verses offer in regard to wealth?

- What are some of the dangers or disadvantages of material wealth? Alternatively, what are some of the advantages to material wealth? What purpose can it serve?

SCENE TO REVIEW

SHOPPING EXPEDITION (00:43:23–00:46:23, CHAPTER 9)

- At afternoon tea, Isabella tells Tilly, “You’ve gone your whole life without fine food; one day will not ruin you. Nor will one shopping expedition.” Do you agree with Isabella’s assessment? Why or why not?
- What are the potential hazards for Tilly after experiencing such extravagance? Conversely, what are the good things (material or otherwise) that emerge from Tilly’s shopping expedition with her grandmother?

Mary makes it clear that she doesn’t want her children exposed to a lifestyle that is not within their means. The Bassett children, though, would love to experience wealth in the form of a delicious Thanksgiving meal or a dress for the Hopkinses’ party.

- Does Mary have reason to worry about her children’s exposure to material wealth?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages that Isabella’s wealth brings to the Bassett family and surrounding community?

A bit later in the movie, Isabella tells a wonderful story about a family’s love for its members. The story serves as a lesson and reminder that a person can be rich in family and spirit.

SCENE TO REVIEW

A STORY (01:00:24–01:03:18, CHAPTER 13)

- Isabella finishes the story with, “Poor in property, but richer than a king in family.” Why is this moral such an important one?
- The story comes at an interesting point in the movie—what is Isabella herself learning about the riches of family and relationships? How can wealth be defined in terms other than material gain?

Read 2 Corinthians 8:9 and Philippians 4:19 (see Scriptures Referenced).



- What's the definition of wealth in these verses?
- In Philippians 4:19, God promises to supply our need according to his riches in Jesus Christ—what does this promise mean? What does it have to do with wealth?

Ellis Bassett plays an important role in the movie, even though we never see him onscreen and his only lines of dialogue are his voice reading a letter that he dictated during the Civil War. Yet, his recent death has made his memories all the more precious to his family. For Tilly, whose definition of wealth fluctuates throughout the story, the memories of her father consistently remain some of her most valued possessions.

SCENE TO REVIEW

MEMORIES OF ELLIS (00:28:20–00:30:59, CHAPTER 6)

- How does Ellis, whom Isabella so disliked, actually serve to create a bond between Tilly and her grandmother?
- What do Tilly's recollections say about her feelings toward her father? According to Tilly's memories, what kind of a man was her father?
- How does this scene represent that memories can be a form of wealth?

As you conclude this theme discussion, consider the following questions:

- How does Tilly grow in her understanding of the definition of wealth? Trace her journey through the film and use scenes as reference.
- Read Jeremiah 9:23–24 and 1 Timothy 6:17–19 (see Scriptures Referenced)—what is the definition of wealth in light of these verses?



THE GIFT OF CHARITY

guiding scripture: 2 Corinthians 9:6-7 (NIV): “Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

SCRIPTURES REFERENCED

- Deuteronomy 16:17 (NLT): “All must give as they are able, according to the blessings given to them by the Lord your God.”
- Micah 6:8 (NIV): “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”
- Matthew 22:37–40 (NIV): “Jesus replied, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”
- Matthew 25:40 (NIV): “The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’”
- Acts 20:35 (NLT): “And I have been a constant example of how you can help those in need by working hard. You should remember the words of the Lord Jesus: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”
- 1 Corinthians 13:13 (KJV): “And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.”
- 2 Corinthians 9:6–7 (NIV): “Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”



- James 1:27 (NIV): “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”
- 2 Peter 1:5–7 (NIV): “For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.”

DVD SCENES TO REVIEW

- Unflagging Piety (00:47:23–00:49:25, Chapter 10)
- About the Rent (00:51:15–00:52:47, Chapter 11)
- Visiting the Yules (01:05:28–01:07:10, Chapter 14)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Charity is highly esteemed throughout the Bible. In fact, according to the King James Version, 1 Corinthians 13:13 (see Scriptures Referenced) calls charity “the greatest of these” when grouped with faith and hope. One of the movie’s finest examples of living a charitable life is Mary Bassett. No matter the circumstances and no matter the cost, Mary faithfully serves her family and neighbors with patience, compassion, and “unflagging piety.”

SCENE TO REVIEW

UNFLAGGING PIETY (00:47:23–00:49:25, CHAPTER 10)

- Based on this scene and what you know of Mary Bassett, what is her philosophy of charity? What does she believe that compels her to act charitably?
- Tilly asks her mother not to return to the Yule household, and Mary responds that the Yules deserve their best efforts. Is Tilly’s request uncharitable? Why or why not?

Read Micah 6:8, Matthew 22:37–40, and James 1:27 (see Scriptures Referenced).

- How do Mary’s actions correspond to the message in these verses?
- What relevance do these verses have in your own life?

Mary isn’t the only one performing charitable deeds in the movie. Because of her social status and the prestige that accompanies it, Isabella is able to reach Mrs. Hopkins, a woman who otherwise may never have ventured beyond her prejudice and grief.

SCENE TO REVIEW

ABOUT THE RENT (00:51:15–00:52:47, CHAPTER 11)

- Mr. Hopkins says that he’s grateful for Isabella, especially since she’s directly contributed to his wife’s emergence from her period of mourning. How does Isabella reach Mrs. Hopkins when others (such as Mary Bassett) have failed to do so?
- Despite Isabella’s reserved demeanor and seemingly judgmental attitude, how could her actions be construed as charitable?

Take a moment to read Deuteronomy 16:17 and 2 Corinthians 9:6–7 (see Scriptures Referenced).

- What do these verses say about Isabella’s success in reaching out to Mrs. Hopkins?
- Deuteronomy 16:17 begins, “All must give as they are able...” What do you think about these instructions? How does this command take shape in the movie?
- Do these verses suggest that charity may look different from person to person? Are there any universal standards where charity is concerned? What are your thoughts?

Tilly spends a great deal of the movie wrestling with her mother’s determination to help the Yule family in spite of the physical threat the sick Yules present. Yet, when Mary falls ill, one of Tilly’s first actions is to prepare a food basket for her neighbors. Tilly’s resolve to help the Yules—even though it may mean a diminished Thanksgiving dinner for her own family—marks a turning point in Tilly’s perspective on charity.

SCENE TO REVIEW

VISITING THE YULES (01:05:28–01:07:10, CHAPTER 14)

- Why does Tilly decide to take the basket to the Yules?
- How do Tilly’s actions represent her growth and maturation in regard to charity?

Tilly’s decision to help the Yules is also representative of the overall gift of charity. Mary has exerted much effort to help her children realize that charity is an extremely desirable virtue, and now she can find joy in the fact that her children are beginning to understand and embrace this wonderful gift.

Read Matthew 25:40 and Acts 20:35 (see Scriptures Referenced).

- God has tremendous compassion for the downtrodden and these verses give us a glimpse of his heart for people. What do these verses say about charity?

As you conclude this theme discussion, consider the following questions:

- 2 Peter 1:5–7 (see Scriptures Referenced) encourages us to add “brotherly kindness” to our faith. What are some tangible ways to do that?
- What other scenes, characters or situations promote the theme of charity?

FINAL THOUGHTS

An Old-Fashioned Thanksgiving is a period piece. How do the filmmakers capture the essence of the time period?

Solomon is fascinated by Isabella's fox fur. At one point, Tilly narrates that the fox gives Solomon a sense of bravery and protection. What are your thoughts on Solomon's attachment to the fox?

As Tilly writes her book, she narrates the first few lines of each chapter. What do you think about the way the movie is structured as a story within a story? What are the advantages to having Tilly's voice and thoughts lead us through the movie?

Take some time to discuss the character of Prudence. What purpose does her role fulfill in the story? What do you think of the exchange between Prudence and Tilly in which the former finally discloses how alienated she feels?

What do you think of the movie's soundtrack? How does music play a role in the storytelling process?



INSPIRATIONAL. POWERFUL. TRUE.



Based on a short story by the acclaimed author of "Little Women," comes a holiday story of family and forgiveness. Recently widowed Mary Bassett (Hélène Joy) and her three children have hit difficult times on their farm. Things are so bad this year that they cannot even afford a turkey for their Thanksgiving dinner. Suddenly, Mary's wealthy and estranged mother Isabella (Jacqueline Bisset) has come to visit. Although she finds a kindred spirit in Mary's eldest daughter and budding writer Tilly (Tatiana Maslany), Mary resents her mother's attempts to help them out of their financial difficulties. In the end, more than money will be needed to heal the emotional wounds that exist between mother and daughter in this moving period drama.

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