

“The Torment of Transformation”

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December 8, 2024

¹See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.

²But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; ³he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. ⁴Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years. (Malachi 3:1-4)

While it is admittedly a gross oversimplification of the plot of [A Christmas Carol](#), we could say that, on that fateful Christmas Eve back in 1843, Ebenezer Scrooge had a rough night. He was literally haunted by four ghosts, a terrifying prospect in itself. Then there was the fact that he was forced to walk and fly around Victorian England at night, in December, in wintry weather, in his pajamas (nobody really talks about that). But what made it truly rough was that he was repeatedly confronted with the sins of his past and present, especially the ones that inflicted pain or suffering upon other people.

Notably, Scrooge did not accept any of this willingly, and he certainly did not choose to be repeatedly criticized and confronted with his misdeeds.

“I am here tonight to warn you that you have yet a chance and hope of escaping my fate,” Jacob Marley says. “A chance and hope of my procuring, Ebenezer... You will be haunted by Three Spirits.”

“Is that the chance and hope you mentioned, Jacob?” Scrooge asks.

When Marley answers, “It is,” Scrooge simply replies, “I think I’d rather not.”

I’ll speak for myself, but I can certainly relate to that response. No one enjoys being confronted with bad things we have done or regrettable things we have said. It is not fun to admit we were wrong. Those moments are uncomfortable, and if given the choice to endure that or not, most of us would say, “I’d rather not.”

And yet, if it had been left up to him -- if Marley had accepted Scrooge’s refusal -- Dickens’ novel would have been much shorter, and much more dismal, for without the confrontation – without the torment of having his misdeeds laid bare and played out right before his eyes – there would have been no awakening to the truth, no opportunity for spiritual growth, and no happy ending.

And that kind of thing is exactly what Malachi’s prophecy is all about. “There is a chance and hope of escaping a dark fate,” the prophet proclaims. “A chance and hope of God’s procuring... but it is going to hurt a little.”

The pain would be brought by a messenger from God. “*I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me,*” God says. Most Christian commentators interpret Malachi’s prophecy to be a reference to John the Baptist, an interpretation that is certainly consistent with the way John is described in the gospels. As the one who came to prepare the way for Christ, John called people to repent and confronted them with the reality of their sins in no



uncertain terms.

Malachi's message, which foreshadowed John's, was that, because the Messiah was soon to come, people needed to clean up and get their spiritual houses in order. And, as prophets often did, Malachi used two powerful metaphors to describe how this penitential house cleaning would go. This messenger, the prophet says, will be *"like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap."*

The first metaphor says that the one who prepares the way *"will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness."* And when it comes to purifying ores and metals, the common denominator is extreme heat and fire. A nugget is melted down in a crucible of some kind, and in the melted state lighter impurities rise to the top while the heavier ore elements, including the precious metal, sink down. After cooling, the heavier layer at the bottom is broken off and heated again to burn off remaining impurities. Sometimes another step of boiling in nitric acid is added to get an even purer product.¹

That, the prophet says, is what human repentance is like. We all have pollutants in our lives, our minds, our spirits, and if our hope is to become purer and more righteous, those impurities need to be isolated and removed. That is the job of the refiner's fire, but it can be an intense and painful process. So much so that we might be tempted to respond like Scrooge. "If that is the hope and chance I am given, I'd rather not."

The same is true of the second metaphor, which compares the process of purification to a thorough cleansing with fuller's soap. In this context, a "fuller" is someone who works on raw wool to clean it and thicken it. As you might imagine, wool shorn from a sheep grazing on the muddy slopes of Ireland or Scotland is not very clean. It is a tangled, dirty mess. Fuller's soap is an earthy, ashy soap that is effective in removing dirt, oil, and other impurities. But it is a harsh and caustic substance, and it is applied with constant friction and pressure to comb out and clean the wool. All of this combines to make "fulling" a very demanding, physically exhausting job. Once the process is complete, the wool is thick and smooth, thick, soft, and very warm. But it takes a lot of fuller's soap and elbow grease to get to that point.²

Both of these metaphors make it clear that the process of confronting our sin, cleansing its stain from our spirits, and creating room for transformation and growth can be a painful thing. Ebenezer Scrooge used the word "torment" to describe the pain of having to revisit the loss of his fiancée Belle. The process of recognition, reflection, regret, and repentance is hard, difficult work to do, and most days we'd just "rather not."

As hard as it was to endure, however, Scrooge's torment opened the door to his transformation. As the inspirational writer and speaker Tony Robbins has observed, ***"Change happens when the pain of staying the same is greater than the pain of change."***³ Having been shown the painful consequences of his sinful behavior, Scrooge arrived at that pivot point when the pain of changing his ways was suddenly outweighed by the greater pain of staying as he was. As the old mantra goes, "The first step in solving a

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/technology/gold-processing/Refining>

² <https://holywellcommunity.wordpress.com/2017/12/19/the-fullers-soap-evensong-sermon-17-12-17/>; <https://richardagee.com/tag/fullers-soap/>; <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fulling>.

³ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/642741-change-happens-when-the-pain-of-staying-the-same-is>

problem is to recognize that a problem does exist.” And after his night with four ghosts, Scrooge certainly knew he had a problem. But what happened to Scrooge was more than that. When he woke up in his bed on Christmas morning, Scrooge knew that he no longer wanted to live the way he had been living. Having been confronted with the depth and depravity of his sin, he realized that it would be too painful to continue his greedy grasping, too painful to continue abusing and neglecting other people, too painful to keep living solely for himself. True, change would be difficult. The refiner’s fire would burn some. Getting scrubbed with fuller’s soap would sting some. But the pain of that cleansing and purification now seemed light, even welcomed, compared with the tragic darkness in which he had been living.

Malcolm Gladwell might call it a tipping point. Tony Robbins calls it “leverage.”⁴ People in Alcoholics Anonymous could call it “hitting rock bottom.” Whatever you or I might call it, a change toward better living, greater joy, and a purer heart begins at that moment when the seesaw flips and we realize that our sin is causing us too much pain... that what our sin is doing to others is causing them too much pain. And it all begins with confrontation – seeing our sin for what it is.

I don’t know what it is in your life... something that you know isn’t quite right, but you can’t quite shake free of it. Maybe it is something other people have noticed; maybe it’s something just between you and God. But if we learn anything from Ebenezer Scrooge and the prophet Malachi it is that being confronted with our sin may indeed be painful, but that pain can be a gift from God... a gift that begins a process of transformation that might just lead us to a healthier and holier way of life. Perhaps this year we will be blessed with such a gift... a little confrontation, a little self-awareness, a little torment over some sin in our lives that has been holding us back. Maybe we will even get to wake up and realize that the sun has come out, the ground beneath us has shifted, and we are now ready to welcome the pain of change as long as it means we no longer have to live as we have been living.

Amen.

⁴ “Tony Robbins: Leverage (and Why You Need It),” <https://www.shortform.com/blog/tony-robbins-leverage/>