

Garments of Grace: Clothing Imagery in the Bible

Lesson 5: "The Priestly Garments of Grace"

"Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and was standing before the Angel. Then He answered and spoke to those who stood before Him, saying, 'Take away the filthy garments from him.' And to him He said, 'See, I have removed your iniquity from you, and I will clothe you with rich robes'" (Zech. 3:3, 4, NKJV).

The cover of the Sabbath School Quarterly shows a picture of Christ placing the white robe of His righteousness on someone. Beautiful as it is, the artist had a difficult job because it seems impossible to show both removal of filthy garments and replacement with pure in the same picture. But, Zechariah is very clear that the old garment is not covered up, but completely removed. It was this process which prepared Joshua for his priestly duties.

"But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy" (1 Peter 2:9, 10).

If we are to join Joshua in His "royal priesthood" we must experience the same process. All who are born into this world have the benefit of the verdict of acquittal obtained at the cross of Christ, but we choose to become part of His priesthood, it is not forced upon us. Peter explains, for you were once not a people and had not received mercy, but now you are God's people and have received mercy. Peter here uses Hosea's imagery (Hos. 2:23) to describe the repentance of his unfaithful bride who finally accepted him as her husband. Mercy must be willingly received. It's called faith which appreciates divine mercy.

Every sinner must first see and acknowledge their character is filthy before they can accept Christ's character, represented by a robe. What does this robe of righteousness qualify us to do? We are to become part of His royal priesthood, which proclaims the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into light. God never changes our character to reassure us we will be taken to heaven. We are to rely on His promises alone for that reassurance. The character change process is to equip us to show the world His creative power.

Our lesson this week looks at the garments of the Levitical high priest. The most intricate of those garments was the breastplate where precious stones refracted light according to their various colors. A startling insight is revealed by comparing Exodus 28 with Ezekiel 28. Ezekiel describes that "every precious stone was your [Lucifer's] covering" (vs. 13). A careful analysis of the listed stones shows that all nine were among the twelve stones of the breastplate of the Levitical priest. Remembering that this was Lucifer's position before "iniquity was found in you" (vs. 15), we gain insight regarding priestly duties.

"Luci" means light, "fer" means to convey or bear. We use the word translucent to describe something through which light passes. We use words like confer, transfer, and refer to describe something conveyed. Lucifer was placed on the holy mountain of God and walked among the fiery stones (vs. 14). While in the presence of God, Lucifer received light to transfer to other created beings. He had no light in himself, it was entirely dependent on divine manifestation. Somehow, he was covered by the precious stones and perhaps he used their different colors and facets to enhance the light he received from God. Since God is love (agape) any light received from Him will always involve the manifestation of that love.

What happened to Lucifer? God said "Therefore I cast you as a profane thing out of the mountain of God; ... I destroyed you, O covering cherub, from the midst of the fiery stones" (vs. 16). Lucifer became concerned with himself thinking that his personal beauty conferred a goodness in him that was his, not from God. No longer was he supremely concerned with reflecting only his Creator God, but he directed attention away from God to himself. No longer caring for the other angels, he deceived them to join him in destruction. He no longer reflected God's self-emptying agape love.

The person who continues to insist they have innate goodness to offer God is doing the same. The closer this person gets to what they think is perfect obedience, the more they are confident God will take them to heaven. This kind of thinking is extremely dangerous, because whatever is not of faith is sin (Rom. 14:23). They never see their need of God.

"To those who know the law only as it stands in a book, and who consequently think that it rests wholly on them to do it, it is a law of works, and as such it does nothing but pronounce a curse upon them. ... He who preaches simply the written law, telling people of their duty to keep it, and inciting them to do the best they can to keep it, is but ministering condemnation. ... because one's best efforts to keep it are themselves only sin" (E. J. Waggoner, *The Everlasting Covenant*, p. 245; Glad Tidings Publishers ed.).

The message given to our church through the 1888 "messengers," Jones and Waggoner, teaches that God is agape. He knows that we cannot change our hearts any more than a leopard can change his spots. But, God cannot change His law that requires perfect obedience, which always comes from the heart. The plan of salvation solves perfectly the human predicament. Christ assumed mankind's sinful fallen nature by becoming the second Adam. He took that human nature with Him to the cross to pay the wages of sin--the second death. Not only did this provide a verdict of acquittal (Rom. 5:16, REB) for the entire human race, but it allowed Christ to give His Holy Spirit to the world--all those for whom He died (John 16:8). The Spirit then goes about His mysterious work of changing our minds and hearts. As we allow Him to work and to do in us according to His good pleasure, we are receiving His robe of righteous character. Isaiah calls it the "garment of praise" instead of a "spirit of heaviness" (Isa. 61:3).

Jesus told His disciples that He would ask His Father to give us another Helper who is the Spirit of truth, "Whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you" (John 14:16, 17). Let the Holy Spirit abide with you and then you will abide with the fiery stones. We thus join the royal priesthood who, unlike the world, are willing to receive light to bear to others. Like Lucifer, too many insist on focusing on character improvement thinking it will obligate God to take them to heaven. There is no concern that God is reflected to others who need to hear the truth.

We are told we can confidently approach the "throne of grace," but confidence must never become arrogance. "Never can we safely put confidence in self or feel, this side of heaven, that we are secure against temptation. ... Those who accept Christ, and in their first confidence say, 'I am saved,' are in danger of trusting to themselves. ... Our only safety is in constant distrust of self, and dependence on Christ" (Christ's Object Lessons, p. 155).

Because our sinful nature will not be changed until Christ returns, we must always distrust our motives. Our desire for obedience must never be in return for God's blessings or even salvation. "All true obedience comes from the heart. It was heart work with Christ. And if we consent, He will so identify Himself with our thoughts and aims, so blend our hearts and minds into conformity to His will, that when obeying Him we shall be but carrying out our own impulses (The Desire of Ages, p. 668). Note the change comes when we let Him identify with our thoughts and aims.

As we receive the gift of His agape, the obedience He produces in us conveys the power of the Creator to a world that generally believes true change of heart is impossible. Our only motive for obedience should be that it would misrepresent God and we love both

Him and the world too much to do that. There is no self in motives that have been changed by God into His agape love.

--*Arlene Hill*