

Garments of Grace: Clothing Imagery in the Bible

Lesson 9: "A Brand Plucked From the Fire"

Another week has gone by while the world watched in amazement as several influential men came on center stage where their inner "secrets" and misguided predictions were revealed. Possibly the most well-known is Dominique Strauss-Kahn, former powerful head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), described as the "world's wallet," was paraded before TV cameras in a "perp walk" in New York City as a common criminal. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Hollywood actor and former governor of California, admitted to fathering a child out of wedlock, destroying a marriage and possibly the lives of his children. One magazine said his actions, and those of the others, "suggest an abuse of power and a betrayal of trust." [1] Is there hope for a world appearing to be "shutting down" in scandal, disgrace, deceit, and corruption? Is there hope for "us," individually and as a corporate remnant church?

Zechariah's prophecy (ch. 3:1-3) says, Yes! Our lesson title, taken from verse 2, is really a question: "Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?" Zechariah had just been shown in vision Joshua the high priest who represents the people standing before the Lord with Satan at his right hand. By asking that question the Lord rebuked Satan.

A "brand" is defined as "a log," "a stump," or "a bent stick used to stir up the fire" (Heb. *'ud*). It relates to "the scorching fires of the Captivity [which] would have eventually consumed the chosen people had not God moved on the hearts of heathen kings to show favor to His scattered children and had not some of them been willing to respond to the call of God to flee out of Babylon." [2]

Does this ancient story of "plucking a brand out of the fire" apply to us today? According to Ellen White: "Zechariah's vision of Joshua and the Angel applies with peculiar force to the experience of God's people in the closing up of the great day of atonement." [3] "Here we find *a representation of the people of God of today*. As Joshua stood before the angel, 'clothed with filthy garments,' so we stand in the presence of Christ, clothed in garments of unrighteousness." [4]

Quoting Zechariah 3:3 Ellen G. White wrote: "Although they have sinned, He has snatched the *race* as a brand from the fire. By His human nature He is linked with man, while through His divine nature He is one with the infinite God. Help is brought within the reach of perishing souls. The adversary is rebuked." [5] Christ, not only our Advocate, but our Judge, rebukes Satan by pronouncing a judicial verdict of acquittal upon the race. "And the Lord said unto Satan, the Lord rebuke thee, O Satan" (Zech. 3:2).

The evidence is clear from Scripture, and from Ellen White. [6] How else could they come before "the Angel" Judge in "filthy garments" unless He had granted them a temporary legal pardon?

Christ's Object Lessons, p. 169 includes two of the "most precious" truths of the 1888 message:

(1) Christ has already accomplished something for every human being (the entire human race); He has elected "all men" to be saved and has died the second death for "every man" (1 John 4:14, John 4:42, Rev. 2:11, Rev. 20:6). Because Christ gives a pardon to the race of sinners they are all represented by Joshua as coming into the investigative judgment, before Him as "the Angel of the Lord", clothed in "filthy garments". It's not our works that we bring to the table. Now we see His true character in the "hour of His judgment" (Rev. 14:7).

(2) Christ, in His human nature, has taken upon Himself "the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh" (Rom. 8:3). He was "in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). Thus He is a Savior "not afar off, but nigh at hand." [6] But sinners have the freedom to refuse Him and reject Him.

But is there more Good News for humanity and the remnant church? "The promise made to Joshua [in Zech. 3:7] is made to all the remnant people of God." [7] It becomes clear that this "change of raiment," this "rich robe" is purely a gift from God, emanating from our Father's *agape* love for His children. "The fact that the acknowledged people of God are represented as standing before the Lord in filthy garments should lead to humility and deep searching of heart on the part of all who profess His name." The [corporate] remnant church, with brokenness of heart and earnest faith, will plead for pardon and deliverance through Jesus their Advocate.

In this "courtroom scene" shown to Zechariah, "Satan's accusations against those who seek the Lord are not prompted by displeasure at their sins. He exults in their defective characters. ... His accusations arise solely from his enmity to Christ ... and with fiendish power and cunning he works to wrest from Him the remnant of the children of men who have accepted His salvation." [8] Satan, the adversary is accusing them for their sins. In the great controversy Satan's prosecution of those names written in the Lamb's book of life is an attempt to take down the character of God. Satan uses their defective characters to get at Him. God is on trial!

As in the ancient Day of Atonement the people followed their High Priest "afflicting their souls"; likewise the whole world is to follow their High Priest into the holiest of all led by

144,000 Elijah's who lighten the earth with "the cleansing of the sanctuary" truth. "If ... we live up to all the light that shines upon us, that light will continue to increase, and we shall have a clean record in heaven. The third angel's message is to *lighten the earth with its glory*; but only those who have withstood temptation in the strength of the Mighty One will be permitted to act a part in proclaiming it when it shall have swelled into the *loud cry*." [9]

The key comes in the next verses (3 and 4): Joshua was wearing "filthy garments," representing the corporate sins of the Israelites. The Lord said, "Take away the filthy garments from him." He "removed the iniquity" from Joshua. He clothed him with a "change of raiment" ("rich robes" NKJV). Note that the Lord did not just *cover up* his filthy garments; He replaced them with "rich robes" *after* removing the iniquity ("filthy garments"). "But Jesus our Advocate presents an effectual plea in behalf of all who by repentance and faith have committed the keeping of their souls to Him [willing to respond to the call of God to flee out of Babylon]. He pleads their cause and vanquishes their accuser by the mighty arguments of Calvary." [10]

The ultimate meaning of the cross is the cleansing of the sanctuary. Finally, the sanctuary truth comes into its own as every living soul on earth clearly understands the righteous garments which Christ gives to all. Individual choices are made either for "the seal of God" or "the mark of the beast." Yes, even the Dominique Strauss-Kahns and Arnold Schwarzeneggers of the world have an equal opportunity with the 144,000 to receive Christ's garments of righteousness in our cosmic Day of Atonement.

It's impossible to be afraid of the judgment when we know the love of the One who is to vindicate us. And it's impossible not to love Him when we understand what He has done for us on the cross. "Love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment. ... There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:17, 18).

Probably none of us have a tiny fraction of the wealth and influence of this week's newsmakers; but we have a new day, a new opportunity, to honor God with the little that we do have. And that is a solemn duty, and also a joyous privilege, for us to devote another day of our lives to honor Him who gave Himself for us. Let us live this new day we have been given in such a way that we shall be able to be happy in that day when we all shall stand before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10). [11]

--Carol A. Kawamoto