

1. In the Loom of Heaven (2Q 2011—Garments of Grace: Clothing Imagery in the Bible)

Biblical material: Isaiah 64, Rom. 3:21–31, 4:1–7, 6:1–13, Phil. 3:3–16.

Quotes

- God preordained, for his own glory and the display of His attributes of mercy and justice, a part of the human race, without any merit of their own, to eternal salvation, and another part, in just punishment of their sin, to eternal damnation.
John Calvin
- If in preaching the gospel you substitute your knowledge of the way of salvation for confidence in the power of the gospel, you hinder people from getting to reality. *Oswald Chambers*
- My salvation was a free gift. I didn't have to work for it and it's better than any gold medal that I've ever won. *Betty Cuthbert*
- There is no salvation outside the church. *Aurelius August*
- Three things are necessary for the salvation of man: to know what he ought to believe; to know what he ought to desire; and to know what he ought to do.
Thomas Aquinas

Questions

What are the dangers in viewing salvation as simply putting on new clothes? How can we best understand the imagery of Christ's robe of righteousness? What does "imputed righteousness" mean and how does it work? What does God really want to do for us? What about the whole idea of "substitution"?

Bible summary

Isaiah 64 contains much imagery of God dealing with us. One aspect is that "all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags." (verse 6 KJV). The many Romans texts need to be rightly read and understood. Look at the different translations, since there is much in the way of theological presuppositions that is brought to the translation of Romans. In fact Paul emphasizes the *internal* aspects of salvation rather than the *external* clothing/imputed righteousness ideas. Additionally, the righteousness of God is about God, not us. That's the basis for translating Romans 3:21-25 like this (FBV):

"But now God's true character of right has been demonstrated—it hasn't got anything to do with the law, even though it was spoken of by the law and the prophets—God's character of right has been demonstrated to everyone who believes and trusts in Jesus Christ. It doesn't matter who we are: everyone has sinned and we miss out on God's glorious presence. God's free and gracious gift is to make us right through the salvation of Christ Jesus, whom God presented to bring about reconciliation as we trust in him."

Similarly the proof text for "imputed righteousness," which when viewed from the perspective of trusting in a healing God, reads very differently:

"...if Abraham was set right by what he did, then he would have something to boast about—but not in God's eyes. But what does scripture say? "Abraham trusted God, and so he was considered as right." Whoever works gets paid, not as a gift, but what

they've earned. But God, who makes sinners right, regards them as right not because they've worked for it but because they trust in him." (Romans 4:2-5 FBV).

Romans 6 is referenced as giving details of the kind of life we should live now that we are "covered, 'clothed,' by Christ's righteousness"—though no mention is made of the clothing imagery in the text. However, the text does provide the "benchmark" of a Christian life—because it is based on trusting the God who saves and heals:

"So how should we respond? Should we go on sinning so we can have more and more grace? Of course not! Since we've already died to sin, how can we live in sin any longer? Don't you realize that every one of us who was baptized into Christ Jesus was baptized into his death?... Anyone who has died is set free from sin. But if we died with Christ, we have confidence that we will also live with him, for we know that since Christ has been raised from the dead he won't ever die, because death has no power over him any more. In dying, he died to sin once and for all, but now he lives—he lives for God! In just the same way you should consider yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Don't let sin have control over your dying body, don't give in to its temptations, and don't use any part of your body as some evil tool of sin. Instead dedicate yourselves to God as people brought back to life from the dead, and use every part of your body as a tool for doing something good for God. (Romans 6:1-3, 7-13 FBV).

We are also told to read Philippians 3 about the "great truth of salvation by faith." Once again no clothing imagery, yet a tremendous description of our relationship to our trustworthy God who totally transforms us:

"Regarding legal observance I'm a Pharisee; as for religious dedication I was a persecutor of the church; while in regard to doing right according to the law I'm blameless!

"But in whatever way such things gained me anything, I count them as a loss for Christ. Truly, I count everything as a loss in exchange for what I've so incredibly gained through knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I've thrown away all these things for him, and consider them trash, so that I might gain Christ. I want to be found in him, not being right because of what I've done, or what the law requires, but made right through confidence in Christ, set right by God through trusting in him. I want to really know him and the power of his resurrection—to take part in his suffering and become like him in his death, so that somehow I might be part of the resurrection from the dead!

"Not that I've already got it all, or that I'm already perfect—but I run so that I might win what was won for me by Christ Jesus. My friends, I don't consider that I've already won, but this is my one objective: disregarding what is behind me, I strain forward to what is in front of me. I run towards the finishing line to win the prize of God's invitation to heaven through Christ Jesus.

"Those of us who are spiritually mature should think like this, and if you think anything different, then God will reveal this to you. We just need to make sure that we follow what we already have understood." (Phil 3:5-16 FBV)

Comment

Much in this lesson, and in this whole quarterly, will be a challenge. That's because the very image of clothing suggests "covering up"—and when it comes to theological symbolism, these can be difficult concepts. For example, clothing is linked to "imputed righteousness":

“‘Imputed righteousness’ means the substitution of His *sinless* life for our *sinful* life. It is credited to us, outside of us, and it covers us completely. We are viewed in God’s eyes as if we have never sinned, as if we have always been completely obedient to God’s commands, as if we were as holy and righteous as Jesus Himself.” (Monday’s lesson).

This raises the question—“is it true?” Is it true that we are actually now “righteous” when we clearly are not—when the evidence says otherwise? Is God engaged in some complex self-deception process? Is he actually lying when he identifies us as righteous when we are in fact sinners? Such questions go to the heart of these studies on clothing as an illustration of God’s salvation. Is this simply a “cover up” (notice how we use these words!), and the sins are still there underneath? Or does God truly *take care* of our sinfulness and actually *change* us? We must always be careful when using images that we don’t say more than is intended. For we don’t want to make God seem near-sighted when we say things like “when God looks at us he doesn’t see us but Jesus.”

Similarly consider the whole idea of “substitution,” a word that is never used in Scripture to describe salvation. The concept of substituting Christ’s robe for our filthy rags can lead us to see the salvation process as external in the same way we go and change our clothes. Jesus makes it clear that salvation is internal, and requires a total transformation from within—it’s not like getting a new outfit! So when we read Ellen White’s words that “Christ is the sinner’s substitute and surety” we had better know what she really meant...

“Clothes Make the Man” announces Wednesday’s lesson, with a scarcely-credible story about a criminal who dressed up like a cop and consequently arrested his partner in crime! In what way do clothes change us—or is it us who decide what to wear based on who we want to be?! In some theologizing we try too hard, and attempt to force imagery to make the picture fit.

The truth is that though clothing is important to us, we cannot invest it with the power to change who we are underneath. We wear nice clothes because we want to look good—we dress up in our best to go to church. But underneath our clothes we know it’s the same old person we know all too well! So while the image of being re-clothed by God is helpful as one aspect of what God does, we cannot make this the final word in how God saves us. We want to be re-made and not just wear clothing made “in the loom of heaven” but be totally transformed from the inside out by God. In this way we can avoid the cheap grace/legalism issues mentioned in the lesson, and gain a far better understanding of God’s purpose for us—made once more in his image, not just wearing donated clothing!

Ellen White Comments

But the plan of redemption had a yet broader and deeper purpose than the salvation of man. It was not for this alone that Christ came to the earth; it was not merely that the inhabitants of this little world might regard the law of God as it should be regarded; but it was to vindicate the character of God before the universe. {PP 68}

The plan of salvation, making manifest the justice and love of God, provides an eternal safeguard against defection in unfallen worlds, as well as among those who shall be redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. {ST December 30, 1889}