

Grace to you and peace ... from Jesus Christ, ... who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood.

¹³ *Gird yourselves and lament, you priests; wail, you who minister before the altar; come, lie all night in sackcloth, you who minister to my God; for the grain offering and the drink offering are withheld from the house of your God.* ¹⁴ *Consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly; gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD. ...* ¹² *“Now, therefore,” says the LORD, “turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.”* ¹³ *So rend your heart, and not your garments; return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm.*

⁹ *After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands,* ¹⁰ *and crying out with a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”* ¹¹ *All the angels stood around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures, and fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,* ¹² *saying: “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom, thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen.”* ¹³ *Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, “Who are these arrayed in white robes, and where did they come from?”* ¹⁴ *And I said to him, “Sir, you know.” So he said to me, “These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”*

Text: Joel 1:13-14; 2:12-13; Rev. 7:9-14 A 2/18-18 Passion History part 1 Ps. 25 Resp. Ps.: 30
Hymns: 155 (alt. tune), 149, 376, 371

FROM SACKCLOTH TO ROBES OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee;
Let the water and the blood
From Thy riven side which flowed
Be of sin the double cure,
Cleanse me from its guilt and power.

Not the labors of my hands
Can fulfill Thy Law's demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone;
Thou must save, and Thou alone.
(TLH #376:1-2)

Dear fellow believers in Christ,

Our Old Testament text is from the prophet Joel. Joel prophesied during a time when the majority of the children of Israel had turned their hearts away from God. The Lord had sent locusts and drought, which devastated their country. It was a judgment on their unbelief and rebelliousness which was meant to humble them and turn them back to God.

The Lord addressed the priests, *“Lament, you priests...; lie all night in sackcloth. Consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly; gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD.”* Many of the priests had also turned their hearts away from God, and had been just ‘going through the motions’ of their priestly duties. God told them to put on shirts made of sackcloth – a rough material, like burlap – as an outward

demonstration of inner repentance. They and all the people should fast and think about their sinful, unbelieving ways, and repent and ask God to forgive them.

“Now, therefore, says the Lord, turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning. So rend your heart, and not your garments.” The people shouldn’t be sorry only because of their troubles (which they had brought upon themselves). And they shouldn’t be sorry only when things were bad, but turn back to their sinful ways when things got better. Their *“fasting, ... weeping, and ... mourning”* were to be outward expressions of humble, sincere repentance to God. The Lord told them, *“Rend your heart, and not your garments.”* In Bible times people sometimes tore part of the robe they were wearing as a sign of sorrow and repentance. The Lord told them to come before Him not simply with a torn garment, but with a ‘broken heart’: sincere sorrow over their sin.

James tells us, *“Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up”* (Ja. 4:8-10). When we say and do sinful things and have sinful attitudes, we bring ourselves trouble and sorrows. Feeling sorry for ourselves, being angry, and making excuses for ourselves only makes things worse for us. We need to humble ourselves before God and sincerely repent of our sins. We confess with David, *“A broken and a contrite heart ... O God, You will not despise”* (Ps. 51:17b).

Joel told the people, *“Rend your heart, and not your garments; return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm.”* God’s *“kindness”* in the original text includes God’s *“mercy, grace, and steadfast love.”* In spite of all their sin-sickness, if the people would come back to God in sincere sorrow over their sins, He would graciously forgive all their sins, stop the locusts and drought and other judgments, and bless them. God told rebellious Israel through Isaiah, *“Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good.... ‘Come now, and let us reason together,’ says the LORD, ‘though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land’”* (Is. 1:16-19).

When we’ve sinned we can’t just ignore our sin and deny our conscience. The only cure for sin and a guilty conscience is repenting to God and receiving His forgiveness. Scripture assures us, *“If we confess our sins, God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”* (1 Jn. 1:9). After the Lord has forgiven us and things have gotten better for us, we can’t just let ourselves slide back into sinful ways. With the psalmist we pray, *“Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting”* (Ps. 139:23-24). With the Lord’s help we can unlearn sinful ways, and learn the ways that are pleasing to Him.

When God made Adam and Eve the Bible tells us that *“they were both naked, ... and were not ashamed”* (Gen. 2:25). But when they disobeyed God and ate fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil *“the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings”* (Gen. 3:7). They had

become sinful, and they tried to cover up their sin and shame. God then clothed them with animal skins. We can't cover up our sin with something we do. Only God can cover our sin. If an animal had to die so its skin could cover Adam and Eve, then it's an Old Testament type, or picture, of Christ, signifying that only a bloody sacrifice provided by God can cover our sins.

The prophet Micah asked, *“Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”* (Mic. 6:7). Isaiah tells us that *“all our righteous deeds are like filthy rags”* (Is. 64:6). Like fig leaves that failed to cover Adam's and Eve's sin, so anything we do fails to cover our sins. Our works cover nothing, and they atone for nothing. Wearing sackcloth never covered anyone's sins. *“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart – these, O God, You will not despise”* (Ps. 51:17).

Only a bloody Sacrifice could cover and atone for our sins – the bloody sacrifice of the Messiah, God's Son, Jesus Christ. Isaiah prophesied of Him, *“Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all”* (Is. 53:4-6). Jesus paid for all of our sins with His suffering and death on the cross.

Looking ahead to what the promised Messiah would do for us Isaiah said, *“The Lord ... my God ... has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me the robe of righteousness”* (Is. 61:10a-b). The Bible says that *“[God] made [Christ] who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him”* (2 Cor. 5:21). Jesus took all of our sins upon Himself, and took them all away. Jesus clothes us with the 'robe' of His perfect righteousness, and our sins are all covered!

In the second part of our text from Revelation 7 we hear that all the believers in heaven *“are clothed with white robes, ... [having] washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”* (Rev. 7: 9c, 14b). The Bible says that on the Judgment Day *“we shall all be changed – in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed”* (1 Cor. 15:51b-52). In heaven Jesus will cleanse us from all sin and free us from all the effects of sin forever.

“Thank You, Jesus, for removing our sackcloth, and covering us with the robe of Your righteousness.”

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress;
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly, –
Wash me, Savior, or I die!

While I draw this fleeting breath,
When my eyelids close in death,
When I soar to worlds unknown,
See Thee on Thy judgment throne,
Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee! Amen.

(TLH #376:3-4)