

In *the* Loom of Heaven



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isaiah 64, Rom. 3:21–31, 4:1–7, 6:1–13, Phil. 3:3–16.*

Memory Text: “ ‘Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered’ ” (*Romans 4:7, NIV*).

Christ is the sinner's substitute and surety. He has obeyed the law in the sinner's place, in order that the sinner may believe in him, and grow up into him in all things to the full stature of a man in Christ Jesus, and thus be complete in him. Christ has made reconciliation for sin, and has borne all its ignominy, reproach, and punishment; and yet while bearing sin, he has brought in everlasting righteousness, so that the believer is spotless before God. The time comes when it is asked, 'Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect?' and the answer is, 'It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again.' He who has the spotless robe of righteousness, woven in the loom of heaven, in which is not a thread that sinful humanity can claim, is at the right hand of God, to clothe his believing children in the perfect garment of his righteousness. Those who are saved in the kingdom of God will have nothing of which to boast in themselves; the praise and the glory will all flow back to God, the giver of salvation."—Ellen G. White, *The Youth's Instructor*, Dec. 6, 1894. Notice the imagery: a robe of righteousness, a *spotless* robe of righteousness, "woven in the loom of heaven" and with not a thread of sinful humanity stitched in anywhere. What a wonderful image of the righteousness of Jesus, the righteousness that covers anyone and everyone who will be saved into His kingdom at last.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 2.*

Staring in the Mirror

It's a sad fact: not all Christians, or those professing Christ, have lived up to the high standards that their faith calls them to. This is a truth revealed, not just in the fall of some famous mega-evangelist or TV preacher but among all Christians.

Who hasn't been greatly disappointed in the actions of someone whom they looked up to as a role model? As they've gotten to know some "good" Christian really well, who hasn't seen faults and flaws that they never knew existed? Some who profess the name of Jesus do better than others, or at least appear to before others, but we all fall short.

What Christian, looking in the mirror, stares in the face of someone who is perfectly reflecting the character of Jesus? What Christian, no matter how faithful, staring in the mirror, can claim any kind of righteousness for himself or for herself? What Christian, staring in the mirror, isn't horrified by what he or she knows lurks beneath the surface?

Read Isaiah 64. What message is being proclaimed there? What garment imagery is used to describe human righteousness, and what does it mean? What hope is presented in the chapter, as well?

The phrase "filthy rags" means a garment defiled by menstruation. What more powerful image could the Bible give to describe human righteousness after the Fall? The apostle Paul picks up on this theme in Romans 3, where he makes it clear that both Jews and Gentiles are in the same position before God: sinners in need of divine grace. Isaiah 64 may be seen as an Old Testament precursor to Romans 3, pointing out our dilemma as sinners and yet not leaving us without hope.

When was the last time you took a deep look at yourself, your thoughts, your innermost motives, and your desires? What did you see? How scary was it? What is your only hope?

Imputed Righteousness

No question, any honest Christian looking at himself or herself, particularly in contrast to the righteousness of God, especially as revealed through Christ, will see something pretty scary. Not much there to commend oneself toward God, is there? In fact, there's nothing at all, nothing but "filthy rags."

What hope, then, do we have? A great hope, actually, and the theological term for that hope is *imputed righteousness*. What does it mean? Very simply, it's the perfect righteousness of Jesus, the righteousness that was "woven in the loom of heaven" and granted to us by faith. "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.

Read Romans 4:1–7. How does Abraham's trust in God illustrate imputed righteousness?

Paul said in Romans 4:2 that if Abraham were justified by works, he could have boasted. However, Abraham believed God, and therefore, he was accounted righteous. Jesus invites us to come to Him in simple belief, sinners though we are, and He will provide His robe of perfection, the perfect righteousness that He wrought out in His life while here in the flesh. That's known as imputed righteousness, and it's the only solution to the dilemma so graphically depicted in Isaiah 64 and Romans 3.

Imagine it like this: Jesus strips away your old stained garments, your filthy rags, and wraps you in the robe of His perfect righteousness, His perfect holiness, His perfect record of law-keeping. He wraps you in it and then whispers in your ear, "Now you are perfect. I have given you My perfection. Please wear this robe, and don't let it slip away from you."

What is the greatest gift anyone ever gave you? How did the gift make you feel, especially if you didn't do anything to deserve it? How much more grateful should we be, then, for the gift of righteousness that Jesus offers us?

Without the Law

A preacher stood before a congregation and declared, “Jesus Christ has changed my life. I am a radically new and different person than I was before.

“However, after 25 years of being a Christian, if there is one truth that my experience has taught me—an experience judged and tested by the Word of God—it is this: if, in the end, I am to be saved, if I do indeed ‘endure to the end,’ as Jesus said, and I make it into God’s eternal kingdom, then there isn’t a doubt in my mind that it will be only because I am covered in the robe of Christ’s righteousness, a righteousness that is woven in the loom of heaven and that covers me completely. I can overcome sin, and through the grace of God I have had many victories; I can overcome character defects, and through the grace of God I have; I can learn to love all sorts of people, even my enemies, and through the grace of God I am learning to.

“All that being said, I know that none of that is anywhere near good enough. Unless I am covered by the righteousness of Jesus, a righteousness credited to me by faith, apart from my obedience to the law, then at the end of the thousand years, you can stand on the wall of the holy city and wave down to me, because I know I won’t be there with you. I *can’t* be there with you.”

Read Romans 3:21–31. What is Paul saying here, and how are the ideas presented in these verses reflected in what the preacher above said?

Though Paul was addressing a specific group with a specific issue, his point is relevant to everyone, Jews and Gentiles. Today, for us as Seventh-day Adventists who believe in the perpetuity of the law, it’s especially important. The righteousness that saves us, the righteousness that we as sinners need covering us like a garment, is a righteousness that has been made manifest “without the law.” In other words, it’s the righteousness of Jesus, the righteousness of His life, the righteousness that brings us “the redemption that is Christ Jesus.” The redemption is in Him, it is found in Him, not in ourselves or in our law-keeping, and this redemption becomes ours by faith.

What has been your experience with law-keeping? Have you ever sensed that your best efforts at obedience were making you right before God? What are the implications of your answer? Bring your response to class on Sabbath and defend your position.

Clothes Make the Man

An author wrote a short story about two small-time crooks trying to pull off a robbery. In the plan, one of the crooks was to dress up in a policeman's uniform and stand in front of the place to be robbed. That way, with him there, no one would be suspicious while his partner pulled off the heist itself. The story ended, however, with the partner dressed as a policeman apprehending and arresting the other one. Dressed as a cop, he started to act like one!

This story makes a point relevant to our topic. Yes, by faith we are covered in the righteousness of Christ, His "robe of righteousness" as it is called. We now are born again and have a new life in Christ. No question, then, that our lives will reflect the garment that we wear.

In receiving Christ's robe of righteousness, we have made a 100 percent commitment to let Him work His attributes of character into our lives. We are justified by grace, the work of a moment, and also have been given a power to obey that is assimilated over time and described as the work of a lifetime. Why would we ask for more? "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (*Phil. 4:13, NKJV*). Certainly that would mean, if nothing else, the power to obey His law.

Read Romans 6:1–13. What do these texts say about what kind of life we are to live, now that we are covered, "clothed," by the righteousness of Jesus?

Paul is very clear here about the radical, life-changing impact that will happen to someone who has "been crucified" with Jesus. Notice the life-and-death imagery here; there's nothing halfway. Our old person, the person in those filthy rags, has died; a new person is born, one clothed in the righteousness of Jesus, a righteousness that is made manifest so that we can now "walk in the newness of life." This newness means that we are no longer to let sin reign in us. We have been given many promises of victory; the question is, Will we claim them for ourselves?

What aspects of your life reveal the reality of your experience with God? What areas are you struggling in? How can you make the choice daily to die to self and live the new life in Christ that is offered us?

Cheap Grace and Legalism

All through the Bible, the inspired writers emphasize the need for obedience. To think that it doesn't matter what we do as long as Christ lives in our hearts is a fallacy. If Christ truly lives in our hearts, good actions must, inevitably, follow. At the same time, it's no less fatal to think that we can be saved by our own works of obedience.

Paul wrote a very impressive list of his life, accomplishments, and pedigree before he met Jesus: he was circumcised on the eighth day, he was a descendant of Israel, he was a Pharisee, he had zeal, and he said he was faultless. Talk about legalism. After his conversion, he called these things rubbish compared to knowing Christ. He gained righteousness by accepting the robe of Christ's righteousness, and he wanted to become like Him.

Read **Philippians 3:3–16.** How is Paul expressing the great truth of salvation by faith and what it means in the life of the one saved?

We must keep distinct, theologically, the imputed righteousness of Christ—the righteousness that justifies us—from the work that the Holy Spirit does in us to change us. We never must separate them in the context of what it means to be a Christian. We must have both. To have the first without the second is like having a coin with only one side. It doesn't exist.

The understanding that obedience comes as a gift keeps us out of two ditches: cheap grace and legalism. First, we will believe in the importance of obeying, and second, our obedience will not be meritorious because we will have received it as a gift. We are just as dependent upon Christ to obey the law and to be sanctified as we are on Him to be justified and forgiven before God. God is more than willing—He's eager not only to justify us but to give us the victory over sin and self. As always, the wild card remains our will: how willing are we to make the daily surrender of self to Him so that we “know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death”? (*Phil. 3:10, NIV*).

Read over the texts again for today. Where do you see the reality of human free will? What does Paul mean in verse 16 when he says “let us live up to what we have already attained”? (*NIV*). What choices can you make that will allow you to do just that?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “The Testing Process,” pp. 88, 89, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4; “Righteousness by Faith,” p. 161, in *Gospel Workers*; “Faith and Acceptance,” pp. 49–55, in *Steps to Christ*.

“The law requires righteousness,—a righteous life, a perfect character; and this man has not to give. He cannot meet the claims of God’s holy law. But Christ, coming to the earth as man, lived a holy life, and developed a perfect character. These He offers as a free gift to all who will receive them. His life stands for the life of men. Thus they have remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God. More than this, Christ imbues men with the attributes of God. He builds up the human character after the similitude of the divine character, a goodly fabric of spiritual strength and beauty. Thus the very righteousness of the law is fulfilled in the believer in Christ. God can ‘be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.’ Rom. 3:26.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 762.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Read again the Ellen G. White quote given for Sabbath. Write out a paraphrase of what she is saying, and bring it to class on Sabbath. Listen to each other’s versions, and share your own. What main points come through?
- 2 In class, discuss your answer to Tuesday’s final question.
- 3 When we put on the robe of Christ’s righteousness, we “who . . . reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory” (see 2 Cor. 3:18, NIV). Describe what reflecting the Lord’s glory means.
- 4 Over the years, some church members have struggled with the question of assurance of salvation. How are we to understand what it means to have assurance? Where is that assurance to be found? How does the imagery of a robe of righteousness woven “in the loom of heaven” without a thread of human devising help us understand where our assurance can come from? How can we know we’re not being presumptuous if we have that assurance?
- 5 Why is it so important to maintain a theological distinction between what Christ has done for us, in that He justifies and forgives us the moment we claim it by faith, and what He works out in us over our lifetime? What dangers arise if we don’t keep that distinction sharp?

No More Devil Sticks

Simon lives in Burundi in eastern Africa. He met a witch doctor who convinced him that he could have great powers. Simon put away his Bible and followed the witch doctor. He pounded sticks into the ground around his house to protect his family from evil spirits.

About this time Simon's friend Samuel attended some evangelistic meetings held by Seventh-day Adventists. He became convinced that he was hearing the truth and surrendered his life to Christ.

Samuel visited Simon and shared what he had learned at the meetings. He urged Simon to leave his witchcraft and follow Christ, but Simon refused. Samuel continued visiting his friend and sharing his faith. One day Samuel asked Simon, "What will be your future if you don't turn your life over to Christ?" Samuel's words pierced Simon's heart, but still he refused to leave his witchcraft.

On one visit Simon told Samuel that he must never eat sweet potatoes or peanuts that have been baked in a fire or he would die. Samuel answered, "I will eat those foods, and God will protect me."

Samuel went home and prayed that God would protect him as he showed his friend that God was stronger than the spirits. Then he returned to Simon carrying the forbidden foods. He put the food into Simon's cooking fire. The men talked as the sweet potatoes and peanuts roasted. Then Samuel pulled them from the fire and ate them. He didn't die; he didn't even look sick. Samuel told his friend, "You have seen for yourself that God is more powerful than the devils in which you trust."

That night Simon couldn't sleep. He found the Bible he had discarded and opened it at random to Hosea 4:12. There he read, "They consult a wooden idol and are answered by a stick of wood. A spirit of prostitution leads them astray; they are unfaithful to their God" (NIV). Simon trembled as he read God's words.

When Samuel returned, Simon told him, "I no longer trust in the sticks that surround my house. Please help me remove them." Samuel prayed, and the men removed the sticks. Then Simon accepted Samuel's invitation to worship with him on Sabbath. Simon and his wife attended the Adventist church that Sabbath and gave their hearts to God.

"We praise God for patiently calling us to follow Him," Simon says. "Now we invite others to come and learn this wonderful truth that Samuel shared with us."

Our mission offerings help support the work of lay evangelists and Global Mission workers such as Samuel and Simon in dozens of countries around the world.

SAMUEL BAZIKWANKANA and SIMON BICURO are lay workers in eastern Burundi.