

Garments of Splendor



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isaiah 1–5; 6:1–8; 51:6–8, 61; Luke 4:16–20.*

Memory Text: “I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels” (*Isaiah 61:10, NIV*).

Living amid the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, Isaiah preached for more than four tumultuous decades, during which he produced some of the richest texts of the Bible. Written during a time of political, moral, military, and economic turmoil, Isaiah's book is permeated, not just with warnings of gloom and doom upon the unrepentant but with themes of salvation, deliverance, and hope—the hope found in “the Lord, thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel,” the One who says, “I am the Lord thy God which teacheth thee to profit, which leadeth thee by the way that thou shouldest go” (*Isa. 48:17*).

Isaiah urged the people to put on the glorious garments of righteousness and to accept God's salvation. Illustrations describing garments, coverings, and sackcloth help teach spiritual truths that have echoed through the ages. For Isaiah's contemporaries and for us, the question is, again: do we claim the garments for ourselves, or do we continue in the shame of our own defilement and nakedness?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 21.*

Bring No More Futile Sacrifices

“In that day the Lord will snatch away their finery: the bangles and headbands and crescent necklaces, the earrings and bracelets and veils, the headdresses and ankle chains and sashes, the perfume bottles and charms, the signet rings and nose rings, the fine robes and the capes and cloaks, the purses and mirrors, and the linen garments and tiaras and shawls” (Isa. 3:18–23, NIV).

The opening chapters of Isaiah present a fairly bleak picture of the spiritual state of the southern kingdom. Over time, the descendants of those who witnessed the incredible miracles of the Exodus had fallen into complacency—and worse! No doubt most of them believed all those wonderful things happened, but the question they might have been asking themselves was, So what? What has any of that to do with us today? Why is what had happened to our ancestors long ago relevant to us today?

Skim through the first five chapters of Isaiah. What were some of the things that the people were doing, or the attitudes they had, that caused such a harsh warning to come upon them? What parallels can you find to our church today?

Perhaps the scariest part in all this is found in the first chapter, in which the Lord decries all their religious observances and practices. In other words, these were people who professed to serve the Lord and who went through the forms of worship. And yet, what does the Lord say about them and their worship? (See Isa. 1:11–15.)

As always, though, the Lord is gracious; as always, He is seeking to save all whom He can. The Cross is all the proof we'll ever need as to how much the Lord wants us to have salvation. Thus, even in these initial chapters, we see the Lord calling out to His people, offering them a way to avert disaster.

How do you worship the Lord? What are you thinking about when you do? How much is show, and how much is deeply felt submission, praise, and repentance, and how can you know the difference?

Unclean Lips

It was in the context of the horrible picture presented in yesterday's lesson that the prophet Isaiah gets his call. It came about 740 B.C., the year King Uzziah of Israel died. Uzziah, starting out well, eventually fell into apostasy (*2 Chronicles 26*) and met a terrible end. At this time, Isaiah began his ministry but not before getting a powerful vision of the Lord.

Read Isaiah 6:1–8. What kind of reaction does Isaiah have? Why is that so significant, especially for our understanding of the plan of salvation?

“Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips” (*Isa. 6:5*).

Notice, Isaiah's response wasn't about the power and majesty of God in contrast to his own weakness; nor was it about the eternity of God in contrast to his own temporality. Instead, the response was one dealing with morality. Isaiah, seeing this vision of God, seeing “the train of his robe” (*Isa. 6:1, NIV*) filling the temple, was overcome by the contrast between God's holiness and his own sinfulness. At that moment, he realized that his great problem was a moral one and that his fallen nature and his corruption could be his ruin. Besides, how could he, a “man of unclean lips,” speak for the Lord of hosts?

What was the solution to this problem?

The symbolic act of touching his lips with the coal revealed the reality of Isaiah's conversion. He was now forgiven his sin; he had a new life in the Lord, and the fruit of that conversion was revealed in verse 8, when he cried out, “Here am I, send me.” Knowing that his sin was purged, he now moved ahead in faith, trusting the righteousness and holiness of God revealed to him in that vision.

Isaiah's guilt was purged, his sin atoned for. He was born again, and the immediate fruit was his willingness to answer the call, “Who will go for us?” Now ask yourself what kind of fruit is being manifested after your own conversion?

Garments That Do Not Last

As we saw earlier, Isaiah spent a lot of time warning about judgment, but he interspersed those warnings with encouraging promises from God. After an explanation of the Lord's devastation of the earth, Isaiah spoke to those in Israel who had, in sincerity, looked forward to the fulfillment of all the promises but who had forgotten the many instances when the Lord led His people through difficult times.

Read Isaiah 51:6–8. What message is the Lord giving to the people? What contrasts are presented? What hope, as well?

Who hasn't seen how easily, and quickly, clothing can be damaged or wear away? It doesn't take much, does it? The finest and richest apparel can be ruined. What an apt parallel for this world and the people on it. How quickly we're here, how quickly we're gone. James, in the New Testament, likens our existence to a "vapor" or a "mist" (*James 4:14*). Welsh poet Dylan Thomas urged his dying father to "not go gentle into that good night" but to "rage, rage against the dying of the light." We can rage all we want, but sooner or later, like a garment, we are gone.

And yet, look at what else Isaiah talks about there: God's salvation, God's righteousness, the garment of Christ's righteousness, which alone brings salvation, a salvation that lasts forever. The Lord here is pointing us to the only two options humans face—dissolution and eternal death or eternal life in a new earth, one that will not "wear out like a garment" (*vs. 6, NIV*) but will remain forever. From Adam and Eve in Eden until the day of Christ's coming, these have been and remain the two ultimate fates of all humanity. They're mutually exclusive, too, meaning it's either one or the other. Which one is a decision only we, as individuals, can make for ourselves?

Read Isaiah 51:7, words addressed to those who know what is right, who have God's law in their hearts. What should that mean to us today? How does having the law in our hearts help us know what is right? Is knowing what is right enough in and of itself to cause us to do right, or is more needed? If so, what?

Garments of Splendor

It's always easy when reading the Old Testament to get caught up in all the warning of gloom and doom. Critics of the Bible love to point out these things and claim, "Who would want to worship or love a God like that?"

Yet, this is selective reading. Time and again the Lord, amid the warnings, offers a way out of the doom. Yes, rebellion and disobedience bring the fruits of destruction. But always the Lord pleads with His people that this doesn't have to be; salvation, righteousness, and security are there, if only we would claim them in the name of the Lord.

Read Isaiah 52. What is the message there? What hope is being offered? In that context, what is the meaning of those "garments of splendor" (*NIV*) that the people are told to wear?

Again, we have the Lord calling His people back to repentance, obedience, and salvation. The "garments of splendor" are the garments of righteousness, the covering that all have who are surrendered to the Lord and who live by faith and obedience to His commandments. It was never complicated; from Eden onward, all God has asked of His people is to live by faith in obedience to Him.

What's fascinating about Isaiah 52 is how it ends and what comes next. It's no coincidence that, right after calling the people to put on "garments of splendor," Isaiah leads into what is the Old Testament's greatest prophetic description of the substitutionary death of Jesus, the very act that has made the "garments of splendor" available for all who seek them. Only through Christ's life and death, and all that they involve, could humanity be saved from the ruin that sin has brought.

Interesting, too, how earlier on, in Isaiah 52:3, the gift of salvation, something we can't earn or buy, is alluded to. "For thus says the Lord: 'You have sold yourselves for nothing, and you shall be redeemed without money' " (*NKJV*). How true—we do sell our souls for nothing, for things of this world, a world that will perish like a garment. And this has created a dilemma for us, because it's a situation that we can't buy our way out of or work our way through. It is only by God's grace that we are saved, a grace revealed through the incredible sacrifice made for us on the cross.

The Garments of Salvation

Some of the most famous texts in all the Bible appear in Luke 4:16–20, when Jesus stood up in His hometown synagogue and read from the book of Isaiah, chapter 61. Then, much to the amazement of those listening, He declared, “This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears” (*Luke 4:21*).

Read through Isaiah 61. What is the theme of the chapter? How is the gospel presented here? What themes presented here are picked up and expounded on in the New Testament? See, for instance, verse 6.

These verses are so rich, filled with all sorts of imagery from the Old Testament that eventually make it into the New. Central to our interest is verse 10: “ ‘I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels’ ” (*NKJV*).

“The provision made is complete, and the eternal righteousness of Christ is placed to the account of every believing soul. The costly, spotless robe, woven in the loom of heaven, has been provided for the repenting, believing sinner, and he may say: ‘I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 394.

The verb translated “decks himself” comes from a Hebrew word that means to “do the work of a priest,” a prophecy of the New Covenant understanding of all of God’s people, those dressed in the garments of salvation, functioning as “priests.” They function, not as mediators as were the Old Testament priests or as Jesus but more in the sense of witnessing to others about the mercy and grace and salvation of God.

Look through Isaiah 61 again. What promises can you take from those verses for yourself? How can you realize those promises for yourself; that is, what practices in your life must you change in order for these to be fulfilled in and for you?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “Lost, and Is Found,” pp. 206, 210, in *Christ’s Object Lessons*; “Instructed in the Law of God,” p. 668, in *Prophets and Kings*; “Calvary,” p. 754, in *The Desire of Ages*; “A Work of Reform,” p. 460, in *The Great Controversy*.

“The white raiment is purity of character, the righteousness of Christ imparted to the sinner. This is indeed a garment of heavenly texture, that can be bought only of Christ for a life of willing obedience.”
—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 88.

Discussion Questions:

❶ Dwell more on the theme found in the early chapter of Isaiah regarding worship, even true forms of worship, that are unacceptable to God. What kinds of worship are offered today, even by us, which might be unacceptable to the Lord? Is the problem the worship itself or something else, such as what the worshippers are doing with themselves when they are not worshipping? Discuss.

❷ Isaiah 61:3 reads, “ ‘To console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified’ ” (NKJV). What is going on here? How can we experience the promises given here?

❸ Delmore Schwartz wrote a short story about a snowfall in New York City that had created, miraculously, beautiful statues throughout the city. People were amazed. The whole city was transfixed. His main character was especially moved, even quit his job so that he could do nothing but stare at the statues, which seemed to have given him a meaning and purpose in life that he got from nothing else. Then, according to the story, a tireless and foul rain fell and overnight all the statues disappeared. They were gone, and things went right back to where they were before the statues came. As the story ended, the main character either fell or jumped in front of a train and died. The point was that by placing hopes in things of this world we are bound for disappointment, because the earth wears away “like a garment.” What have been your own experiences with how easily the things of this world disappoint, and what have you learned from those experiences?

Caught by Christ

by JIM FONG

I grew up in a traditional Chinese family. My parents worship ancestors and follow the traditional religions of China. They gave me an excellent upbringing and encouraged me to excel in school. Their influence helped me get into the best schools, and when I graduated I thought I was pretty good—like a little god.

I went to Australia to continue my studies. There I met another Chinese student who invited me to attend a care group—a small Bible study group. The small group and the Bible studies drew me to God. I am a logical person, and I enjoyed studying Bible prophecy. I reasoned that if so many Bible prophecies have been fulfilled, then prophecies about the future must be true, as well. I wanted to know where we came from and where we are going. The studies gave me hope about the future. Heaven became my goal.

As a student, my life is really busy, but I discovered that the Sabbath was a precious respite from work and studies. I began keeping the Sabbath and discovered that even with fewer hours of study I still did well on my exams and papers. I knew that God was blessing me.

I used to think I could solve my own problems. But when I repeatedly failed my Australian driver's license test, I became frustrated. Finally, I surrendered my need to God, and He gave me peace and helped me pass the test on my next try. I've learned to pray about everything and let God control the outcome.

God taught me about prayer and about the Sabbath. But I made excuses about baptism—I wasn't good enough, I was too busy. Then at a retreat for young people, God impressed me that I needed to commit my life to Him through baptism. When I surrendered, I felt such peace!

I'm seeing God work miracles in my life every day. He has given me a great job right out of college, even though I'm a foreign student with little experience. I understand now that everything in this world is under God's control.

I thank God for my friends at the university who invited me to study the Bible with them and become part of their care group. I didn't know it then, but this group is a Global Mission church plant, supported by donors and mission offerings from people around the world. What a great God we serve, and what a great church family we have. Thank you!



JIM FONG (left) shares his faith in Melbourne, Australia.