

THE SACKCLOTH GARMENTS

Lesson 6

I. What is Sackcloth And What Did It Represent?

- A. Sackcloth is a coarse, black cloth made from goat's hair.
1. It was coarse, rough, and thick fabric used for sacks that might be compared to burlap fabric today.
 2. Wearing this rough fabric was likely intended to cause discomfort therefore wearing it may have been representative of penance.
- B. The wearing of sackcloth was often accompanied by other things:
1. Tearing the regular garments they were wearing.
Esther 4:1 – *"When Mordecai learned all that had happened, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city. He cried out with a loud and bitter cry."*
 2. Putting the dust on their heads
Nehemiah 9:1 – *"Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads."*
 3. Putting ashes on the sackcloth garment
Jeremiah 6:26 – *"O daughter of my people, Dress in sackcloth and roll about in ashes! Make mourning as for an only son, most bitter lamentation;"*
 4. Sometimes they wore ropes around their heads.
1 Kings 20:32 – *"So they wore sackcloth around their waists and put ropes around their heads, and came to the king of Israel and said, "Your servant Ben-Hadad says, 'Please let me live.'"*
 5. On some occasions they shaved their heads and clip their beards.
Jeremiah 48:37-38 – *"For every head shall be bald, and every beard clipped; On all the hands shall be cuts, and on the loins sackcloth."*
See also **Isaiah 22:12** and **Ezekiel 7:18**
 6. Very often wearing sackcloth was accompanied by fasting.
Daniel 9:3 – *"Then I set my face toward the Lord God to make request by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes."*
- C. It is unknown when the practice of wearing sackcloth began.
1. There is no evidence that God ever commanded the wearing of sackcloth, although many of the prophets called upon the Israelites to wear sackcloth in certain circumstances.
 2. The first time it is mentioned in the Bible is when Jacob believed that his son Joseph had been eaten by a wild animal. Notice that this is before the Law of Moses was established so it was not part of that law.
 3. **Genesis 37:34** *"Then Jacob tore his clothes, put sackcloth on his waist, and mourned for his son many days."*

II. The Wearing Of Sackcloth Was Used When Circumstances Were Dire.

A. When mourning the loss of loved ones or important officials.

1. When Jacob was presented with the bloodstained coat he had made for his favorite son, Joseph, he put on sackcloth and mourned for many days. None of his sons could console him. (**Genesis 37:34**)
2. **2 Samuel 3:31** *"Then David said to Joab and to all the people who were with him, "Tear your clothes, gird yourselves with sackcloth, and mourn for Abner."*

B. When petitioning God for mercy.

1. **I Chronicles 21** – David orders Joab, his commander, to count the people of Israel.
2. Joab objected to this idea saying "However many there are, they are all your servants. Why do you want to be a cause of guilt to Israel?"
3. However, David overruled Joab so he counted the men old enough to carry a sword into battle - but he did not count the tribes of Levi or Benjamin because Joab thought David's command was "abominable".
4. Joab was right because God was displeased with this thing. (vs 7)
5. The Lord sent a prophet named Gad to David to give him the choice of three punishments for his sin.
 - a. Three years of famine in the land
 - b. Three months of defeat by his enemies
 - c. Three days of the sword of the Lord destroying throughout all of Israel.
6. David chose the destruction of the Lord because he knew that God was merciful.
 - a. David didn't want to be defeated by his enemies for three months because it could result Israel being taken captive by their enemies for a much longer time.
 - b. David also did not want the people of Israel tortured with famine for three years.
 - c. David chose to be placed in the hands of God for three days because David knew of God's great capacity for MERCY.
 - d. So God sent a plague on Israel and 70,000 men died in one day.
 - e. Then God sent an angel to destroy Jerusalem.
 - As the angel was destroying the city, the Lord looked at the destruction and relented of the disaster.
 - God was merciful and commanded the Angel to halt the destruction.
 - David was right to trust in the mercy of God.
 - f. David saw that the angel was standing between earth and heaven and his sword was stretched out to destroy Jerusalem.

- David and the elders of Israel were all clothed in sackcloth and they fell on their faces prostrate before God.
 - David admits his sin and begs God for mercy.
¹⁷ And David said to God, "Was it not I who commanded the people to be numbered? I am the one who has sinned and done evil indeed; but these sheep, what have they done? Let Your hand, I pray, O LORD my God, be against me and my father's house, but not against Your people that they should be plagued."
 - g. God commanded the prophet to tell David to erect an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of Ornan, the Jebusite.
 - So David went to Ornan, who had also seen the angel of God standing above Jerusalem.
 - David asked Ornan to allow him build an altar on his threshing floor and offered to pay the full price the land was worth.
 - Ornan said he wanted to give David the land, the oxen for the burnt offerings and the wood for the burnt offering.
 - David refused Ornan's offer saying, "I will not take what is yours for the Lord, nor offer burnt offerings that cost me nothing."
 - So David gave Ornan the full price and build his altar to the Lord where he made burnt offerings and peace offerings and called upon the Lord.
 - God answered David by providing fire from heaven on the altar of burnt offerings.
 - Then the God commanded his angel to return his sword to its sheath and stop the destruction of Jerusalem.
- C. **An Act of Repentance**: Nineveh (The book of **Jonah**)
1. Jonah's instructions from God:
 - a. Jonah was a prophet of God. He was instructed to go to the great Gentile city of Nineveh and pronounce God's judgment upon the city for its great wickedness.
 - b. For some unknown reason, Jonah decided to run from the presence of God by taking a ship sailing to Tarshish.
 - c. Obviously, no one can hide from God – so God sent a great wind on the sea so violent that the ship was about to be broken up.
 - d. The mariners were very afraid and each man cried out to his false god and threw cargo overboard to lighten the load on the ship.
 - e. Jonah was asleep in the lowest part of the ship. The captain came to wake him telling him to call on his God to save them.
 - f. Then the men on the ship cast lots to see if they could determine who was the cause for the trouble – the lot fell on Jonah.

- g. They asked Jonah who he was and where was he from. He said, *"I am a Hebrew and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."* **(1:9)**
 - h. Jonah had told the men that he was running from the presence of God so they asked Jonah what they should do to calm the sea.
 - i. Jonah told them to throw him into the sea and the sea would become calm. Although they didn't want to, they finally threw Jonah overboard.
 - j. God prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah.
 - k. He was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.
 - l. Jonah prayed to God and He spoke to the fish and it spit Jonah onto dry land.
2. The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time (**Jonah 3**)
- a. Jonah was again instructed to go to Nineveh, which was a very large city that took three days to walk through it all.
 - b. The message Jonah proclaimed was: *"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"* (vs. 4)
 - c. The people of Nineveh believed God and proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them.
 - d. The king of Nineveh was also clothed in sackcloth and sat in ashes and he made a proclamation:
 - Let every man and beast be covered with sackcloth and cry mightily to God.
 - Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands.
 - Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?
 - e. God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way and He relented from the disaster that he said would come upon them.
3. Jonah did not approve of God's decision to spare the city.
- a. Jonah said, "This is just what I thought when I fled to Tarshish. **(4:2-3)** – "For I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness, One who relents from doing harm. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!"
 - b. God asked Jonah, *"Is it right for you to be angry?"*
 - c. But Jonah went out of the city and made him a shelter and sat under it in the shade where he could watch the city to see what would happen.
 - God prepared a plant to grow up over Jonah to make shade for his head to make him more comfortable.

- The next morning God prepared a worm to damage the plant so that it withered.
- When the sun arose, God send a strong east wind and the sun beat on Jonah's head so that he grew faint and Jonah wanted to die.
- God asked Jonah why he was angry about the plant since Jonah did not plant it nor make it grow.
- God wanted to know why Jonah had pity on a simple plant that grew and withered overnight, but had no pity on a great city with more than 120,000 people in it along with all of their live stock.

D. **Seeking Delivernce from an enemy:** King Hezekiah
(**II Kings 18-19, Isaiah 36-37**)

1. Hezekiah became king of Judah when he was 25 years old and he did what was right in the sight of God, unlike his father Ahaz who sacrificed one of his sons to foreign gods.
2. **II Kings 18:5** – *⁵ He trusted in the LORD God of Israel, so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor who were before him. ⁶ For he held fast to the LORD; he did not depart from following Him, but kept His commandments, which the LORD had commanded Moses. ⁷ The LORD was with him; he prospered wherever he went. And he rebelled against the king of Assyria and did not serve him.* (as Israel did)
3. When Hezekiah had been king for four years, the king of Assyria captured Israel (the ten northern tribes) and carried them away to live as slaves in Persia because Israel did not obey God but served the false gods of the heathen nations round them.
4. Ten years later the king of Assyria brought his army against all the fortified cities of Judah except Judah.
 - a. King Hezekiah was afraid so he sent a message to the king of Assyria saying he would pay whatever was required to get them to turn away from Judah.
 - b. The king of Assyria required 300 talents of silver and 30 talents of gold.
 - c. Hezekiah gave him the silver that was found in the house of the Lord and in the treasuries of the king's house.
 - d. Then Hezekiah stripped all of the gold from the doors of the Temple of the Lord and the pillars which Hezekiah had overlaid and gave it to the king of Assyria.
5. Even after the gifts, the king of Assyria sent his army against Jerusalem.
 - a. One of the king's officials gave a message to King Hezekiah of Judah
 - "Why do you boast about having power for war? It is just words."
 - "Who is it that you trust that gives you the confidence to rebel against me (King of Assyria)?"

- "If you trust Egypt to be your ally, you are trusting in a broken reed."
 - "If you say you trust in the Lord our God you wasting your time"
 - "The Lord told me to destroy this land,"
 - The King says, "Do not let Hezekiah deceive you by saying '*Trust in the Lord, for He will deliver us.*'"
 - "Make peace with us by giving gifts to the king and you can stay in your homes until we return to take you away to a land like your own."
 - "Don't believe that the Lord will deliver you. None of the gods of the other nations have been able to deliver them from the king of Assyria."
- b. Hezekiah's three servants listened but did not say anything. They tore their clothes and went to King Hezekiah and told him the message from the king of Assyria.
6. When Hezekiah heard it, he tore his clothes, covered himself with sackcloth and went to the house of the Lord.
- a. He sent his three servants dressed in sackcloth to the prophet Isaiah:
- They told Isaiah how the King of Assyria had blasphemed saying that God was not able to deliver Judah from his army.
 - Perhaps the Lord has heard the blasphemous words of the Assyrians and He will rebuke them.
 - They asked Isaiah to pray for the remnant in Judah.
- b. Isaiah said, "*Thus says the Lord: "Do not be afraid of the words which you have heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed Me. Surely I will send a spirit upon him, and he shall hear a rumor and return to his own land; and I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land."* (II Kings 19:6-7)
7. But the messenger of the King of Assyria again repeated his threats in a letter to King Hezekiah saying: (II Kings 19:10-13)
- a. "Do not let your God in whom you trust deceive you saying '*Jerusalem shall not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.*'"
- b. "Look at what I have done to all the nations around you, utterly destroying them – and you think you will be delivered?"
- c. None of the gods of the other nations could deliver them from being destroyed over many generations. Where are their kings now?"
8. King Hezekiah took the letter to the house of the Lord and spread it before the Lord as he prayed:
- a. "O Lord God of Israel, the One who dwells between the cherubin, You are God, You alone." (vs. 15)
- b. "You have made heaven and earth." (vs. 15)

- c. "Incline Your ear, O Lord, and hear; open Your eyes, O Lord, and see; and hear the words of King Sennacherib, which he has sent to reproach the living God."
 - d. "The King of Assyria has laid waste the nations around us and cast their gods into the fire; for they were not gods, but the work of men's hands – wood and stone. Therefore, they destroyed them." (vs. 18)
 - e. "O Lord our God, I pray, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you are the Lord God, You alone." (vs. 19)
 - f. Isaiah, the prophet, sent word to King Hezekiah saying:
 - "Because you have prayed to Me against Sennacherib, king of Assyria, I have heard."
 - "He has reproached Me when he boasts that by the multitude of his chariots he has destroyed many nations."
 - "I know his dwelling place and his rage against Me has come to My ears."
 - "Therefore, I will turn him back by the same way he came."
 - "He shall not come into this city (Jerusalem), nor shoot an arrow there, nor build a siege mound against it, for I will defend this city to save it for My own sake and for My servant David's sake.
9. (Vs. 35) Finally the Lord sent out an angel and he killed the soldiers in the camp of the Assyrians – 185,000.
- a. When the people arose early in the morning, there were the dead all around.
 - b. The king of Assyria left and returned to his home in Nineveh.
 - c. While he was worshipping his false god, two of his sons struck him down with a sword, then they escaped to another land.
 - d. Just as the prophet Isaiah had pronounced, the king of Assyria was killed by a sword in his own land.

III. We Have Learned That Wearing Sackcloth Was A Way Of Expressing Humility When Approaching God For Help In Desperate Circumstances.

- A. The wearing of sackcloth is primarily an Old Testament practice.
 1. Sackcloth is mentioned 46 times in the Bible, with only four in the New Testament.
 2. None of the New Testament references to sackcloth were actually someone wearing the sackcloth.
 3. In Matthew 11:21 and Luke 10:13 Jesus is chastising the cities of Bethsaida and Corrizan because they refused to believe his teaching, so he said: "*For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.*"
 4. The other two New Testament references are in Revelation 6:12 and Revelation 11/3 which were prophetic messages.

- B. God required mankind to humble themselves before God well before the Law of Moses was written.
1. **Exodus 10:3** – *"So Moses and Aaron came in to Pharaoh and said to him, 'Thus says the Lord God of the Hebrews: 'How long will you refuse to humble yourself before Me?'"* Even the enemies of God were required to show humility before the creator of all things.
 2. **Numbers 12:3** – Moses was declared the most humble man on the face of the earth. Obviously, this is why he was chosen to for the enormously important job of freeing the Israelites from slavery.
 3. When Solomon completed the Temple, God spoke to him saying that the time would come when God would have to withhold the rain and send pestilence among the people because they would not follow the commands of the Lord. But God reminded Solomon that God was always willing to relent from His punishment **IF** the people humbled themselves and turned from their evil ways.
2 Chronicles 7:14 – *"...if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land."*
- C. Many examples show us that even those who were considered extremely evil received a second chance when they responded to God in humility.
1. No one in the Old Testament has a worse reputation for being evil than King Ahab and his evil bride Jezebel.
 - a. **I Kings 21** – Ahab wanted a vineyard that belonged to Naboth, but Naboth refused because it would cheat his heirs out of the land of their inheritance.
 - b. King Ahab was so selfish that when Naboth refused, Ahab went to bed and pouted and refused to eat. (vs. 4)
 - c. When Jezebel saw this, she told him to get up because she would give him Naboth's vineyard. Then she enacted a plan to have Naboth killed.
 - d. When she reported to Ahab that Naboth was dead, he immediately went to the vineyard to take possession of the land.
 - e. Vs. 24 – *"The dogs shall eat whoever belongs to Ahab and dies in the city, and the birds of the air shall eat whoever dies in the field."*
 - f. Vs. 25-26 – *"There was no one like Ahab who sold himself to do wickedness in the sight of the Lord, because Jezebel his wife stirred him up. And he behaved very abominably in following idols, according to all that the Amorites had done, whom the Lord had cut out before the children of Israel."*
 - g. When Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and fasted and went about mourning.

- h. Then the Lord spoke to Isaiah again and said: Vs 29 – *"See how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the calamity in his days. In the days of his son I will bring the calamity on his house."*
 2. Who would ever have thought that God would have mercy on one as evil as Ahab?
 3. We can bring that lesson forward to today when we speak to people who are either lost in their sin or are unfaithful Christians.
 - a. Sometimes people are hesitant to become a Christian because they think their lives have been so bad that God would not forgive them. If God would show mercy to Ahab, then anyone who humbles himself before God in repentance will also receive that same mercy.
 - b. There are often those who were faithful Christians, but somehow they slipped away from the church. When we approach them about coming back, they say, "When I get my life together, then I will come back."
 - Do they not understand that only by humbling yourself before God in repentance will they get their lives "together".
 - Do they not understand that their whole problem is a failure to humbly submit themselves to God by keeping his commandments.
- D. Learning to be submissive to God is the key to Christianity.
1. Jesus spoke about the importance of being humble:
 1. **Matthew 18:4** – *"Therefore whoever **humbles** himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."*
 2. **Luke 14:11**—*"For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."*
 2. Jesus was the perfect example of humility:
 1. **Philippians 2:5-9** – *"⁵ Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, ⁷ but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. ⁹ Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name,"*
 2. **I Peter 5:6** – tells us that we can expect to be exalted also if we have the same mind in us as Jesus had:
"Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time,"
 3. Humility is just one of the virtues Christians must endeavor to attain, but it is a very important one:
Colossians 3:12-13 – *"¹² Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, **humility**, meekness,*

longsuffering; ¹³ bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do."

4. Humility is a virtue that will help us in evangelizing.
 - a. **II Timothy 2:24-26** – *"²⁴ And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, ²⁵ in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, ²⁶ and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will."*
 - b. It is easier to help those who are lost when we remember that there was a time when we ourselves were among the disobedient. **Titus 3:1** – *"² to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable, gentle, **showing all humility to all men.** ³ For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. ⁴ But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, ⁵ not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life."*
5. We must also teach our children to be submissive to their parents and to those in authority. Understanding submission in worldly matters lays the groundwork for successfully teaching them to be submissive to God (which is humility).
 - a. **I Peter 2:13-14** – *"³ Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, ¹⁴ or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good."*
 - b. **I Peter 5:5** – *"Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with **humility**, for "God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble."*

CONCLUSION:

Aren't you glad we don't have to wear sackcloth and roll in ashes in order to demonstrate our humility – although we should be willing to do that if it was required.