



"If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility."

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

22-Feb-13

Sackcloth: A Spiritual Tool

At this time of year, religious people around [the world](#) look at their individual decisions and choices of the past. Some choose to go to special mid-day services and confess their errors, while others give up certain foods or pleasures in an attempt to do penance. A few may even go to elaborate extremes of pain and denial of the body, and many do not give much thought at all.

In this way, people are attempting to redeem themselves. This world's Christianity is preparing to celebrate [Easter](#), an observance that millions of people believe to be true but that is in reality only what religious people have interpreted from Scripture and tradition by their human reasoning. They totally ignore what [God](#) says He wants. [Proverbs 14:12](#) says plainly, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death."

The Creator God has established times and seasons, and this includes the holy times He wants His people to observe. [Passover](#), an annual memorial of the sacrifice of His Son that God has instituted for His people, is just a few weeks away. It is not just that He wants us to worship Him at the right time,

but there is also a correct *way* to come before the Almighty. This way includes that we search our hearts, analyze our choices, and respond in a proper manner. As the apostle Paul instructs us in [1 Corinthians 11:28](#), "But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread, and let him drink of the cup."

The Bible presents a tool that can have a beneficial effect in our approach to God. In the King James Version, it is mentioned 46 times. This tool is an act that many in ancient days did physically, but we must do spiritually: to put on [sackcloth](#) and ashes in [mourning](#), to humble ourselves, and repent. God tells us in [Isaiah 66:2](#), "But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word." Such a person is truly humble.

Some scholars believe that sackcloth was originally woven by people in Mesopotamia very early in recorded history. Abraham hailed from this area of the world, so he was probably familiar with this material in his lifetime. Sackcloth fabric, a coarse cloth, was woven from several kinds of fibers: camel hair, goat hair, hemp, cotton, or flax. Sackcloth is generally considered to be a rough and itchy like the abrasive and loosely woven potato-sack material that most of us today are familiar with.

The first mention of sackcloth appears in the story of Jacob being deceived by his sons. [Genesis 37:33-35](#) describes how Jacob reacted upon seeing the shredded and bloody coat of many colors and hearing that his beloved son, Joseph, had supposedly died:

And he recognized it and said, "It is my son's tunic. A wild beast has devoured him. Without doubt Joseph is torn to pieces." Then Jacob tore his clothes, put sackcloth on his waist, and mourned for his son many days. And all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and he said, "For I shall go down into the grave to my son in mourning." Thus his father wept for him.

In this age of progressive degeneration, we, too, mourn and weep, physically at times, but more so spiritually for the wickedness in our society. Murders, hatred, and growing immorality all run rampant. We mourn also because of

the many brethren who have to fight perpetually, as we do, against the attractions and distractions of carnal lifestyles. We mourn for the mistakes we have all made. Putting on a spiritual garment of sackcloth in mourning seems relevant and necessary in humbling ourselves as a part of the process in examining and scrutinizing our lives.

Paul writes in [II Corinthians 13:5](#) (*New American Standard Bible*), "Test yourselves to see if you are in the [faith](#); examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that [Jesus Christ](#) is in you—unless indeed you fail the test?" This is part of a continuing process that we as Christians must follow if we want to draw closer to God and please Him. We need to do this, not just once a year, but continually.

There are several biblical examples of this kind of mourning. The one that may come to mind first is God's command to the angel to "go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who [sigh and cry](#) over all the abominations that are done within it" ([Ezekiel 9:4](#)). Putting on the uncomfortable spiritual garment of sackcloth reminds us of the abuses and pain of [sin](#) in society.

Daniel is another example. Judah and Israel had transgressed God's laws and rejected Him. In [Daniel 9:3-19](#), the prophet, after preparing himself by fasting and donning sackcloth and ashes, confesses all the sins of the people in supplication to God for mercy. From his words, it is clear that this preparation had humbled him and enabled him to reverence God properly, giving him an attitude of proper sorrow and [repentance](#). We are advised and encouraged in [Joel 2:12-13](#) to come before God in humbleness of mind and heart, with a repentant attitude and mournful spirit. Like Daniel, we can do this through fasting and putting on spiritual sackcloth.

Our Christian walk is not always filled with sunshine and rainbows. We can expect times filled with troubles, periods of stress, and mourning. Through them, God wants us to remain loyal, perpetually striving to overcome. We need to put on spiritual sackcloth, coming before God in humility to seek the understanding and [wisdom](#) we lack, repenting as necessary, and striving to overcome the [works of the flesh](#), the enticements and attractions of the society we live in, and the constant attacks by unseen spiritual forces.

It is at our weakest moments that the enemy will try his hardest to sabotage us and deceive us. Many people have left the church during times of severe strife, testing, and personal hurt. The enemy will stop at nothing to try and subvert God's plan for us. But we have assurance from Jesus Himself, "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me [you may have peace](#). In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" ([John 16:33](#)).

As we face our trials, let us put on our spiritual sackcloth and remember that Christ is both for us and in us. He knows what we go through. We have a responsibility to do our very best in obeying Him. When we realize that we have fallen short and must repent, remember that God sees through our façade; nothing is hidden from Him, as He sees into the very depths of our hearts ([Hebrews 4:13](#)).

We need to make better use of this spiritual tool of sackcloth. God understands that we will fail at times, but He expects us to rend our hearts before Him, trusting that He is working out all things for our good ([Romans 8:28](#)). He does not desire religion as much as a loving relationship with His children. "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](#)" ([Joel 2:13](#)).

- Gary Montgomery

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

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by Martin G. Collins

As Christians, we can be conditioned to rejoice in trials, paradoxically having joy in the midst of grief and heaviness. Trials come in great variety, from persecution to alienation to martyrdom. We must understand why these trials happen to us. If we have a "why," we can put up with any "how," enabling us to inwardly rejoice in the ultimate outcome, realizing that we are in a special relationship with God. Faith from God will be required to endure

and profit from trials, bringing about character and genuineness of faith, as well as patience and trust in Almighty God. We are not permanently under trial, but are tried for a finite time only for our purification, ultimate good, and perfection.

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by John W. Ritenbaugh

Blessedness and mourning seem contradictory to our way of thinking, but obviously Jesus saw spiritual benefits to sorrow. John Ritenbaugh shows why true, godly mourning gets such high marks from God.

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