

A Time To Tear

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Solomon penned my keynote scripture at a passage that we know well; and that is Ecclesiastes 3:7. There is “a time to rend, and a time to sew” (Revised Standard Version). Now, I particularly like the commitment to the Anglo-Saxon idiom in the Good News Translation: There is a “time for tearing and the time for mending.” Rending or tearing is ruinous, destructive, potentially rendering a garment unusable. A garment with a tear in it is weakened, perhaps seriously; it has lost its drape and its integrity and indeed, it becomes highly susceptible to further damage should the tear spread. A torn garment loses its capability to cover and to protect from the sun or from the wet and the cold.

Conversely, mending is constructive; it is reparative and it is restorative. The *Common English Version* has that scripture, “a time for tearing and a time for repairing.” Although God’s Word makes reference to both rending and sewing, the images are not discussed very much today. Indeed, the unusually comprehensive *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* has very little to say about either rending or sewing. In my memory, far and few between have been the sermons or even sermonettes on the topic of rending.

Today, I want to approach that topic, and I am going to focus on the symbolic meanings behind the rending of clothes, something that is not really a part of our culture today. We do not do it today but something that very definitely was a cultural artifact in the days of our forefathers.

Before we get there, however, let us spend a few moments looking at the concept of rending in a bit of a broader context; I mean, aside from the tearing of cloth. More than a few times, God uses the term “rending” in the sense of separating a kingdom or tearing a kingdom away from its king. Notice I Kings 11, where we read that God, who, upset with Solomon, told him He would tear the united kingdom from his son, Rehoboam. That happened, of course, after Solomon’s death.

I Kings 11:11 (AMP) Therefore the Lord said to Solomon, because you are doing this and have not kept My covenant and My statutes, which I have commanded you, I will certainly rend the kingdom from you and give it to your servant.

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God is referring to Solomon's idolatry and speaks of the servant Jeroboam. At other times, God repairs a kingdom, as if He reconstructs it or sews it together. You may find an example of this type of image in Amos 9:11. This is a Millennial prophecy. The *New Century Version* really does a good job here:

Amos 9:11 (NCV) The kingdom of David is like a fallen tent [The tent is like a fabric, as a piece of canvas that is torn.] but in that day I will set it up again and mend its broken places.

At the coronation of many kings, the new monarch quite commonly is presented with a royal robe and that symbolizes his kingdom. Not his authority or power; the scepter symbolizes that. Rather, the robe symbolizes his kingdom as a whole. The king becomes closely associated with his kingdom; he actually wears it, you could say. It becomes a part of him.

When he loses his kingdom, he in essence loses his royal garment. Please turn to I Samuel 15. The imagery of tearing a kingdom away and of tearing a garment is combined in this rather dramatic scene where Samuel talks to Saul and they discuss Saul's failure to slay Agag, king of the Amalekites.

I Samuel 15:24-28 (HCSB) Saul answered Samuel, "I have sinned. I have transgressed the Lord's command and your words. Because I was afraid of the people, I obeyed them. Now therefore, please forgive my sin and return with me so I can worship the Lord." Samuel replied to Saul, "I will not return with you. Because you rejected the word of the Lord, the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel." When Samuel turned to go, Saul grabbed the hem of his robe, and it tore. Samuel said to him, "The Lord has torn the kingship of Israel away from you today and has given it to your neighbor who is better than you."

Samuel was using a reference to David, of course.

Well, this scripture provides a good segue from the topic of rending kingdoms to the more everyday, in fact commonplace, activity of rending clothes, the less dramatic focus of my comments today. It may be less dramatic, but we are going to see, brethren, that there are some real lessons in the symbolism of rending clothes. Please, turn to Genesis 37, where the Hebrew word commonly translated "rend" first appears. Incidentally, this is Strong's Hebrew lexicon number 7167.

The use of the word “rend” here well illustrates both the denotation, that is the dictionary meaning of the word, as well as its connotation, that is, the emotional baggage which accompanies it. Genesis 37, reading from *The Message*. It is generally not at all a good translation, but here it actually rises to the occasion.

Genesis 37:29-30 (The Message) Later Reuben came back and went to the cistern—no Joseph! He ripped [That is the word rend.] his clothes in despair. Beside himself, he went to his brothers. “The boy’s gone! What am I going to do!”

Notice the idea that Jacob’s firstborn was beside himself. Other translations render the prepositional phrase “in despair” with such terms as in “grief or in sorrow.” *The Voice* actually has it that he was “in agony and despair.”

The emotional superstructure, the connotation, around the rending of clothing is despair, the emotion which underlies such exclamations as, “Woe is me!” or such questions as, “What am I going to do now?”

Rip! It happens quickly, suddenly, unexpectedly, often through carelessness or sometimes through violence. Rip! The damage done is not always easily repaired. You know brethren, this custom of tearing clothes must have kept more than a few seamstresses in business in those days.

We will see examples in a minute where the rending of clothes is connected with mourning. Indeed, it is quite natural for it to have become a practice associated with mourning for the dead. From a human point of view, from a strictly human perspective, death is hopeless. Only God has the power to restore life; only He can mend the situation, repair it. Only He can end the despair we feel at the death of a loved one.

So, rending clothes indicates a spirit of hopelessness and despair. Keep hold of that concept; we are going to be coming back to it. As we will see shortly, rending of clothes may be, but it does not have to, an outward sign of humility and even an outward sign of repentance. That is, rending of clothes may be indicative of the agony which attends true repentance.

There are probably around 30 examples of the tearing of clothes in the Scriptures. We will quickly walk through a number of the scriptures, more or less chronologically, and take a look at the usage of the word “rend” in various contexts.

We will start with Leviticus 10. Here the stress is on mourning at the loss of Nadab and Abihu.

Leviticus 10:6 (GNT) Then Moses said to Aaron and to his sons Eleazar and Ithamar, “Do not leave your hair uncombed or tear your clothes to show that you are in mourning. If you do, you will die, and the Lord will be angry with the whole community.”

Now, there is something very profound behind this idea of *not* tearing clothes. You see, it is important that a priest (this is of course what Aaron and his sons were); that they do not lose hope, that they never come to feel the situation is hopeless, that any situation is hopeless. That they never manifest or exhibit a sense of hopelessness in the presence of the people; in the presence of the public.

As intercessors between God and man, the priest becomes symbolically the physical embodiment of hope. Man makes a mess of things, just as Abihu and Nadab certainly did. Only God, through His loving kindness, can restore normalcy; only He can ultimately repair the relationship. The priest must not despair and he must not, therefore, appear unbelieving in calamitous situations. What he must do, conversely, is exude hope before the people. We are going to come back to this concept of hope to see its relation in just a few minutes, so hold on to it.

But for now, we will go to a second example of the use of rending clothes. This is Numbers 14. Here, the context focuses more on despair than on mourning. This took place when the children of Israel, not trusting God’s ability to lead them into the land of Israel, sought to pick a leader and return to Egypt.

Numbers 14:6 (GWT) At the same time, two of those who had explored the land, Joshua (son of Nun) and Caleb (son of Jephunneh), tore their clothes in despair.

Caleb and Joshua (notice that neither of them were priests) were mightily disconsolate over the rebellion and over the faithlessness of the people. Tearing their clothes illustrated their despair at the situation.

Turn over to Joshua 7 to see another example. This is a clear example of despair as the result of a military defeat, as the Israelites were deeply distressed at their failure to capture Ai, a rather small town; not much of a military challenge but, of course, we know

it did not work out that way.

Joshua 7:6 (GWT) Joshua and the leaders of Israel tore their clothes in grief. They put dust on their heads and bowed down to the ground in front of the Lord's ark. They stayed there until evening.

II Samuel 1:11, reading from the *Good News Translation*, provides yet another example. At news of Saul's death in battle, "David tore his clothes in sorrow, and all his men did the same." David reacted the same way when he learned of his son Amnon's death, as recorded in II Samuel 13:30-33. Job 1:20, which records how Job, upon hearing of his children's' deaths, also tore his clothing. As I mentioned earlier, tearing clothes was apparently a traditional response to the death of a loved one in Israel at the time.

Ezra 9 generates a particularly intriguing example, as it also involves a priest, just like we saw in the case of Aaron and Eleazar and Ithamar, which I mentioned earlier. Here, Ezra has just learned of the widespread intermarriage that was taking place between Israel and the Gentiles of his day. I will read from the *Names of God Bible*.

Ezra 9:3 (NGB) When I heard this [That is, when Ezra found out about this situation.] I tore my clothes in distress, pulled hair from my scalp and my beard, and sat down in shock.

He was very much distressed at this particular news. Drop down to verse 5.

Ezra 9:5 (NGB) At the evening sacrifice I got up from my misery, and with my clothes torn, I knelt down, stretched out my hands to God in prayer

Sadly, brethren, some commentators discount; they make light of the importance of the intermarriage problem of this time, I suspect in the interests of being politically correct. But, the Scriptures themselves indicate that Ezra found nothing at all about the situation to discount its importance. He was deeply, profoundly distressed.

As was Mordecai, as indicated by Esther 4. This passage indicates Mordecai's distress when he hears of Haman's plot.

Esther 4:1 (GNT) When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes in anguish. Then he dressed in sackcloth, covered his head with

ashes, and walked through the city, wailing loud and bitterly

As my last three Old Testament examples, I want to look at three incidences where kings, one of them bad, two of them good, tore their clothes. Please, turn first to Isaiah 36 to talk about Hezekiah. Here, the Assyrian general is outside Jerusalem and he speaks to the leaders and he speaks to the people gathered on the walls of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was under siege and was shut up. The Assyrian leader is in fact taunting God here. He says:

Isaiah 18:18-22 (HCSB) Beware that Hezekiah does not mislead you by saying, 'The Eternal will deliver us.' Has any one of the gods of the nations delivered his land from the power of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they delivered Samaria from my power? Who among all the gods of these lands ever delivered his land from my power? So will the Lord deliver Jerusalem?" But they [the leaders] kept silent; they didn't say anything, for the king's command was, "Don't answer him." Then Eliakim son of Hilkiah, who was in charge of the palace, Shebna the court secretary, and Joah son of Asaph, the court historian, came to Hezekiah with their clothes torn and reported to him the words of Rabshakeh [the Assyrian general].

These leaders were in despair, very clearly, and they were probably shocked that the name of God had been so publicly abused by this infidel. We will continue there in verse 1 of the next chapter; in Isaiah 37 where the story continues.

Isaiah 37:1 (HCSB) When King Hezekiah heard their report, he tore his clothes [So, he did the same thing.], put on sackcloth, and went to the Lord's temple.

Hezekiah then sends the leaders to the prophet Isaiah. And their comments to the prophet indicate the intense level of hopelessness which they feel at this situation.

Isaiah 37: 3-4 (HCSB) "This is what Hezekiah says: 'Today is a day of distress, rebuke, and disgrace, for children have come to the point of birth, and there is no strength to deliver them. Perhaps Yahweh your God will hear all the words of Rabshakeh, whom his master the king of Assyria sent to mock the living God, and will rebuke him for the words that Yahweh your

God has heard.”

In this case, a good king, Hezekiah, recognizing the dire straits in which his kingdom lies, and the godlessness of an enemy general, expresses his grief by tearing his clothing.

As a second example, please turn to II Kings 22. Here, we will see another case of a good king rending his clothing, though in a substantially different context. Josiah sets about repairing the Temple. In the process of carrying out the work, the high priest at the time, Hilkiah, discovers a scroll containing a copy of the law and it was probably the book of Deuteronomy. Before long, it is read to the king.

II Kings 22:11-12 (HCSB) When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes. Then he commanded Hilkiah the priest “Go and inquire of the Lord for me, the people, and all Judah about the instruction in this book that has been found. For great is the Lord’s wrath that is kindled against us because our ancestors have not obeyed the words of this book in order to do everything written about us.”

Josiah was desperate to right a badly askew situation. He ardently sets about to make the crooked straight. He was the type of person described in Isaiah 66. I will not ask you to turn there, as you know the passage well. There, God notifies us of the type of person He hears. This from the *Complete Jewish Bible*.

Isaiah 66:2 (CJB) The kind of person on whom I look with favor is one with a poor and humble spirit, who trembles at My word.

So, Josiah trembled at God's Word and the tearing of his clothes became an outward sign of his spirit of contrition, his humility, as well as his concern for the spiritual health of Israel. Josiah profoundly understood the depths to which Israel had fallen, the degree of its failure to meet God’s expectations. And he understood the consequences of that failure. Here, the tearing of clothing represents far more than just mourning. More than just despair. It signifies something much closer to what Paul describes in II Corinthians 7:10. There Paul writes of repentance, he refers to it as the “godly grief [which] produces a repentance that leads to salvation.” Josiah's tearing of his clothes came to signify a certain degree of contrition and repentance.

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Keeping this theme of repentance in mind, please turn to I Kings 21, which narrates a third example of a king who tore his clothes. This is the story of the Israelite king, Ahab, a bad king, who rends his clothes after Elijah tells him that God has determined to rend his kingdom; to tear his kingdom away from him. This was the northern kingdom. So, this is another case of a double rending: rending of clothes, rending of kingdom.

I Kings 21:27 (HCSB) When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, put sackcloth over his body, and fasted. He lay down in sackcloth and walked around subdued.

God was impressed enough with Ahab's response that He deferred judgment until after Ahab's death. Ahab's rending of clothes was an outward sign that he had humbled himself, a sign of at least some degree of repentance. Please understand, brethren, I am not suggesting that Ahab was fully repentant at this time; I do not think that is the case. Now, God speaks to Elijah:

I Kings 21:29 (HCSB) Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? I will not bring the disaster during his lifetime, because he has humbled himself before Me. I will bring the disaster on his house during his son's lifetime."

This incident clearly reveals what the tearing of clothes is really all about. More than just a sign of distress, more than a sign of despair or desperate hopelessness, the tearing of clothes can be a sign of humility before God, and an outward sign of repentance.

With that understanding, turn to the New Testament. There are not so many examples of tearing clothes there, but some of them are really very important. Many of them tie in to the examples that we have seen in the Old Testament.

First, I will point out Acts 14. This incident would be almost humorous if it were not so utterly, utterly sad. In Lystra, Paul and Barnabas heal a man. The ignorantly superstitious people of the city, seeing the miracle, consider God's servants to be gods. They name Paul Zeus and Barnabas Hermes (that is, Mercury), and then proceed to sacrifice to them. I will read from the *Contemporary English Version*.

Acts 14:14-15 (CEV) When the two apostles found out about this, they tore their clothes in horror and ran to the crowd, shouting: Why are you doing this? We are humans just like you. Please give up all this foolishness. Turn

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to the living God, who made the sky, the earth, the sea, and everything in them.

In this example, the tearing of clothes is accompanied very clearly with a call for repentance, “turn to the living God.” It should be becoming crystal clear to us by this time that rending of clothes is very much connected with repentance.

We are going see more of that later, but, before I close, I need to focus on some other important references to tearing of clothes right here in the New Testament. Please, turn John 19. Here, at the crucifixion of Christ, we have an example of a garment which was not torn and for a very good reason. Now, we saw a case where a garment was not torn in the case of Aaron and his son; here is a New Testament case.

John 19:23-24 (HCSB) When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took His clothes and divided them into four parts, a part for each soldier. They also took the tunic, which was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. So they said to one another, “Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it, to see who gets it.” They did this to fulfill the scripture that says: They divided My clothes among themselves, and they cast lots for My clothing.

The Old Testament reference here is to Psalm 22. I will just read the pertinent part of this Messianic prophecy. Verse 18, (Holman Christian Standard Bible). “They divided My garments among themselves, and they cast lots for My clothing.”

For context, to really understand this scripture, we need to turn back to Leviticus 21. Why was it important that Christ’s tunic not be torn? In this chapter, Moses is pointing out that priests in general were to be set apart from others, remaining, as it were, holy, sanctified. They were different, not like everyone else. Concerning the high priest, Moses writes:

Leviticus 21:10 (HCSB) The priest who is highest among his brothers [That is, the high priest.], who has had the anointing oil poured on his head and has been ordained to wear the garments, must not dishevel his hair or tear his garments.

Regular people, even kings, could tear their garments. We saw lots of examples of that. God did not deem that an unworthy activity at all. And in, in some cases, He highly

respected it. But the high priest, that embodiment of hope, the intercessor between God and man, was not to do so.

Paul, in the book of Hebrews, writes frequently of the priesthood. In fact, he uses the term “high priest” about 19 times in Hebrews. In Hebrews 3:1, Paul asks us to “consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession.” Paul is saying that Christ is our High Priest, He is the High Priest of our faith. I only know of one occasion in the Old Testament when a priest tore his robes, and that was Ezra, in the case I mentioned before that is recorded in Ezra 9:3-5. But, remember, he was not a high priest. I know of no examples at all where a high priest has torn his garments.

Except one. Turn please to Mark 14. Here Caiaphas, which Matthew 26:3 indicates to be the name of the high priest at the time, violated God’s command, His injunction, against the tearing of his clothes.

Mark 14:63 (HCSB) Then the high priest tore his robes and said, “Why do we still need witnesses?”

He knew the law, he knew that of course for any legal thing they needed to have 3 or 4 witnesses. He denied that; he disavowed that. And he tore his clothes. Shortly afterward, the veil in the Temple was itself torn, top to bottom, as God dissolved that old priesthood, at least for the time, with its cadre of unqualified priests, unknowledgeable priests, unfaithful priests, disobedient priests, unrepentant priests, despairing priests. In their place, God accepted Christ as the qualified “High Priest of our confession.” He did not lose hope, and neither should we, priests in training. Notice Paul’s comments concerning hope recorded:

Colossians 1:21-23 (GNT) At one time you were far away from God and were His enemies because of the evil things you did and thought. But now, by means of the physical death of His Son, God has made you His friends, in order to bring you, holy, pure, and faultless, into His presence. You must, of course, continue faithful on a firm and sure foundation, and must not allow yourselves to be shaken from the hope you gained when you heard the gospel.

Hope is very important. The apostle Peter, seconding these sentiments, also stresses the importance of hope.

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I Peter 1:13 (NET) Therefore, get your minds ready for action by being fully sober, and set your hope completely on the grace that will be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Our hope is not to lie in the Constitution of the United States, the Republican Party, the conservatives; not even in conservatism. It is not to lie in anything except the grace of God.

I am going to close by looking at chapter 2 of the book of Joel, as I return to the relationship between the rending of clothes and repentance. The subject here is the day of the Lord, a day more desperate than any, a day of despair for sure.

Joel 2:11 (HCSB) The Lord raises His voice [That is as a thunder or shout.] in the presence of His army. His camp is very large; those who carry out His command are powerful. Indeed, the Day of the Lord is terrible and dreadful—who can endure it? Even now—this is the Lord’s declaration—turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, weeping, and mourning. Tear your hearts, not just your clothes, and return to the Lord your God. For He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, rich in faithful love, and He relents from sending disaster. Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave a blessing behind Him, so you can offer grain and wine to the Lord your God.

Verse 12 is important: “Even now.” The *Contemporary English Version* puts it,

Joel 2:12 (CEV) It isn’t too late. You can still return to Me with all your heart. Start crying and mourning!

But, the mourning must not be superficial, just external. The *Good News Translation* renders verse 13 this way:

Joel 2:13 (GNT) Let your broken heart show your sorrow; tearing your clothes is not enough. Come back to the Lord your God. He is kind and full of mercy; He is patient and keeps His promise; He is always ready to forgive and not punish.

The Living Bible puts it, “Let your remorse tear at your hearts and not your garments.”

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The Voice has it, “Rip the wickedness out of your hearts; don’t just tear your clothing.” *The Message* puts it rather interestingly, “Change your life, not just your clothes.” That phraseology there is reminiscent of Paul’s admonition in two passages I will not turn to: Ephesians 4:24 and Colossians 3:10. In both places, the apostle Paul says to “put on the new man,” as one puts on clothes and hopefully, brethren not clothes that are torn. For, you see, we are putting on a new self, a new nature or a new person, as translators render it.

Yes, even at the very, very end, when Christ has issued the shout starting the final battle, repentance is possible. Of course, we know we dare not wait, deferring our repentance until the last dog is hung, as they say. For, we do not know when we will die and the window of opportunity to repent will have closed for us.

What is interesting about the Joel passage is something that we must not forget. Even in the terrifying Day of the Lord, described here in Joel 2, there is hope. “Even then,” people can repent. “Who knows,” verse 14 avers, God “may turn and relent and leave a blessing behind Him.”

The repentant person may be protected, surviving into the Millennium, where he can offer grain and wine, serving the true God. Perhaps no other passage so muscularly expresses the power of true repentance; its ability to elicit God’s mercy even in the Day of the Lord. Yes, there is hope in rending your heart.