

“Garments of Salvation”

Well, have you done it? Have you even given it consideration? I’m talking about a New Year’s resolution – it’s only a few days away, you know. I don’t know if most people are like me, or not, but I don’t usually think about such things until the day of, or the day before. And like many last-minute things – it doesn’t work out very well.

There’s just something about the start of a new year that provokes thoughts of change – but it’s not just any change – it’s always a change for the better. I mean, you’re not going to resolve to chew more this year – or put on some weight – or max out another credit card.

No, change for the better is what everyone wants – and let me tell you – that sells! Just watch the tv commercials and ads that pop up on your social media for the next couple of months. It’s not just fad diets or nicotine patches – its all kinds of alterations and improvements.

Extreme changes – overhauls – clean sweep. Nothing subtle here – what you need is complete change – and the world is right there to tell you how, and to sell you what you need. To you who are IN the world, but not OF the world – listen to the extreme makeover proclaimed from the mouth of Isaiah the prophet:

“I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult 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 like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.”

If you come in at the end of a TV makeover show and all you see is the restored car – or the completely redone house – it’s great, it’s beautiful – but isn’t that the way its supposed to be? True appreciation only comes when you see – not just the finished product – but the way things were before.

The prophet Isaiah reveals the Lord’s transformation of His people. And to fully appreciate this extreme change – we need to hear and see the “before” and “after.” Then we can actually see what has changed.

What did we look like “before” the Lord adorned us with the jewels – the robe of righteousness and the garments of salvation? Like a TV show – maybe we should flash a warning here – because the Bible’s depiction of our “before” can be pretty graphic, disturbing – and yet, absolutely true.

Actually, our original condition – the “before” picture taken in the Garden of Eden BEFORE the need for any transformation – shows Adam and Eve being naked, not ashamed, and everything is “very good.”

But all of that changed when mankind took matters into his own hands – when Adam and Eve decided to be the designers of their own lives. Rather than following the Word of the Lord – they had their own wish list for life.

Rejecting God’s Word – and living by their own – was outright rebellion, rebellion against God Himself. They’d been hustled – taken in by a lie – deceived by the great deceiver. What was promised by the serpent didn’t pan out – but what God says remained true.

Breaking ties with God by their rebellious sin – death now entered the world – Adam and Eve died that day, spiritually. They were now separated from God. All of creation had been changed. Their eyes were opened – and now they saw their condition as fallen, sinful human beings – they were naked. BEFORE – originally – that was very good. But now, it’s a problem.

So, Adam and Eve do what sinful human beings do by nature – they continue to take matters into their own hands – trying to fix what they’ve broken. Their guilt and shame led them to manufacture garments for themselves – something to hide their nakedness – to cover up, and deny, their sinful rebellion against God.

Ever since the fall into sin – mankind has been obsessed with crafting his own wardrobe – but what an utter failure that has been. The prophets Isaiah and Zechariah describe our man-made garments in graphic terms.

Isaiah declares that “all our righteous acts are as filthy rags” – the good deeds we do to cover up, or make up for our sinfulness – are literally, menstrual rags. Zechariah speaks of Joshua standing before the Lord as high priest, representing all of Israel – and describes him as one who is “dressed in filthy clothes” – the people of God, wearing clothes smeared with excrement.

I told you it was not a pretty picture – but it’s true. Our fallen, sinful nature, is unclean. Of ourselves, we are cut off from God. Like the guest in the Parable of the Wedding Banquet who does not have the proper garments – we are tied hand and foot and thrown outside into the darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Our sin separates us from God – and all our attempts to cover ourselves up with righteous acts, good works, kind deeds, and the like – fail miserably. In, and of, ourselves – we are naked, filthy, and rightly thrown out from the presence of the Lord.

Dearly beloved, the Lord has good news for you. In His grace and mercy – He has clothed you with nothing less than His very own Son, Jesus Christ. The Son of God has become flesh, clothed in our flesh and blood – stripped naked in our place, smeared with the filthiness of the world’s sin, and thrown out of the Holy City and forsaken by His Father – all so that He might clothe you with His garment of salvation, covering you with His righteousness.

Martin Luther loved to talk about this “joyous exchange.” Using this imagery of the marriage of Christ to His Bride the Church (that’s you, and all believers in Christ) – Luther writes:

Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them – and sins, death and damnation will be Christ’s – while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul’s – for if Christ is a bridegroom, he must take upon himself the things which are the bride’s and bestow on her the things that are his.

And so it is when Christ comes to you – what is yours becomes His, and what is His, becomes yours. He strips you of your clothes and drapes you with His own. “The angel [of the Lord] said to those who were standing before [Joshua], ‘Take off his filthy clothes.’ Then he said to Joshua, ‘See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you.’”

Such is the transformation that God has worked for you, in Christ Jesus. Through the Gospel – Christ’s blood, shed in payment for all sin – now covers your sinful nakedness. In the waters of Holy Baptism, the Holy Spirit washes you in that blood – renewing you, regenerating you, returning you to your original condition – holy and precious in the sight of God.

As our New Year’s resolutions remind us – the need for change is ongoing. We continually return to our old ways, our sinful desires and designs for our own lives. That is why the One born of Mary and laid in a manger – comes to you today – giving His very own Body and Blood to you – to forgive your sin, to remove your transgressions – to cover you with His righteousness, and restore you to your Heavenly Father.

In Christ Jesus, you are “a crown of beauty” – a “royal diadem” – His holy and precious people. Living by faith in Jesus your Savior – you are His beloved child. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.