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*Garments of Grace:
Clothing Imagery in the Bible*

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Introduction

A Thing Bigger Than Itself

Symbols¹ are everywhere. Our language and thoughts are symbols. Symbols mean something more than what they are or appear to be. The letters of the word *dog* are not a dog or *any* dog. Together, they are a symbol. Words are put in type on a page and are made of letters and sounds. No matter how they are put together, these letters never can be what they stand in for. They cannot be a dog. The word *dog*, in every language, speech, or print, represents (shows) something bigger than itself.

Language, culture, society, politics, and life come to us through symbols: flags, signs, pictures, sayings, art, poetry, sculpture, dance, buildings, and customs. Their meanings often differ from place to place. So many things mean more than what they are.

Maybe that is why the Bible is filled with symbols too. In Genesis 2, God made the seventh day a symbol of the six days of Creation. The first gospel (good news) promise is the promise of salvation² for fallen man. It was shown in symbols: seed, head, heel (Genesis 3:15). They all point to greater things than just seeds, heads, and heels. The Lord Himself spoke in symbols to Cain after he murdered his brother Abel. “Your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground” (Genesis 4:10, NIrV).

All through the Bible, symbols are examples of things and ideas bigger than themselves. For example, the rainbow after the Flood (Genesis 9:13), Joseph’s dreams (Genesis 37:1–11), the three angels of Revelation 14 (Revelation 14:6–12), the entire sanctuary service³ of the Old Testament time (Hebrews 9), the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper (Mark 14:22–25). They all point to truths greater than themselves.

As Seventh-day Adventists, we all know the symbols of Daniel’s prophecies:⁴ a winged lion (Daniel 7:4), a beast with iron teeth (Daniel 7:7), a goat that “touched not the ground” (Daniel 8:5), a statue with feet of iron and clay (Daniel 2:33). Again, all these are symbols of greater things or ideas.

There also are the powerful symbols found in biblical poetry: “Who has measured the oceans by using the palm of his hand? Who has used the width of his hand to mark off the sky? Who has measured out the dust of the earth in a

1. symbols—objects, marks, signs, or persons that stand for, or mean, the same thing as other objects, ideas, or things.

2. salvation—God’s plan for saving sinners from eternal (without end) death; the gift of eternal life; being saved from sin or evil.

3. sanctuary service—the offering of animal blood as a payment for sin. The animal blood was offered in place of the sinner’s blood. This service represented (showed) Jesus’ dying on the cross for our sins. After Jesus died, these services were not needed.

4. prophecies—special messages from God, often explaining what will happen in the future.

basket? Who has weighed the mountains on scales? Who has weighed the hills in a balance?” (Isaiah 40:12, NIV). And there also are symbols as simple as “A word spoken at the right time is like golden apples on a silver tray” (Proverbs 25:11, HCSB).

And what about the parables⁵ Jesus told? The lost sheep (Luke 15:1–6), the rich man burning in hell (Luke 16:22–31), the marriage supper (Matthew 22:1–13), and the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1–13). All these stories contain (are full of) ideas that have little or nothing to do with the symbols themselves. (For example, Christ came to give eternal [forever; without end] life to sinners. He did not come to find lost farm animals.)

This quarter’s lessons focus on one kind of symbol—the symbol of clothing and clothes. (We give special thanks to Myrna Tetz for this idea. Myrna, now retired, was managing editor of the *Adventist Review*.) We will study the clothes that people in the Bible wore. We will study what that clothing really meant, what truths it symbolized (stood for), and what it really pointed to. We can learn lessons from Lucifer’s (Satan’s) beautiful coverings in heaven to the filthy (dirty) rags of our own righteousness (goodness) and from the coats of animal skins for Adam and Eve in Eden to the “clothes [robes] of glory” in Isaiah 52:1, NIV. The Bible uses clothing and symbols of clothing to show truths about sin, pride, righteousness, salvation, justification,⁶ resurrection (return to life), and eternal life in Christ.

Of course, we are not what we wear. But what we wear can say much about who we are. So, as with all symbols, garments (clothes) can reveal (show) something greater than themselves.

5. parables—short simple stories that teach a truth.

6. justification—being forgiven and made clean from sin.