

# In *the* Loom of Heaven



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Isaiah 64, Rom. 3:21–31, 4:1–7, 6:1–13, Phil. 3:3–16.*

**Memory Text:** “‘Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered’ ” (*Romans 4:7, NIV*).

Christ is the sinner's substitute and surety. He has obeyed the law in the sinner's place, in order that the sinner may believe in him, and grow up into him in all things to the full stature of a man in Christ Jesus, and thus be complete in him. Christ has made reconciliation for sin, and has borne all its ignominy, reproach, and punishment; and yet while bearing sin, he has brought in everlasting righteousness, so that the believer is spotless before God. The time comes when it is asked, 'Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect?' and the answer is, 'It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again.' He who has the spotless robe of righteousness, woven in the loom of heaven, in which is not a thread that sinful humanity can claim, is at the right hand of God to clothe his believing children in the perfect garment of his righteousness. Those who are saved in the kingdom of God will have nothing of which to boast in themselves; the praise and the glory will all flow back to God, the giver of salvation."—Ellen G. White, *The Youth's Instructor*, Dec. 6, 1894. Notice the imagery: a robe of righteousness, a *spotless* robe of righteousness, "woven in the loom of heaven" and with not a thread of sinful humanity stitched in anywhere. What a wonderful image of the righteousness of Jesus, the righteousness that covers anyone and everyone who will be saved into His kingdom at last.

*\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 2.*

## Staring in the Mirror

It's a sad fact: not all Christians, or those professing Christ, have lived up to the high standards to which their faith calls them. This is a truth revealed, not just in the fall of some famous mega-evangelist or TV preacher but among all Christians.

Who hasn't been greatly disappointed by the actions of someone whom they looked up to as a role model? As they've gotten to know some "good" Christian really well, who hasn't seen faults and flaws that they never knew existed? Some who profess the name of Jesus do better than others, or at least appear to before others, but we all fall short.

What Christian, looking in the mirror, stares in the face of someone who reflects perfectly the character of Jesus? What Christian, no matter how faithful, staring in the mirror, can claim any kind of righteousness for himself or herself? What Christian, staring in the mirror, isn't horrified by what he or she knows lurks beneath the surface?

**Read** Isaiah 64. What message is being proclaimed there? What garment imagery is used to describe human righteousness, and what does it mean? What hope is presented in the chapter, as well?

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The phrase "filthy rags" refers to a garment defiled by menstruation. What more powerful image could the Bible give to describe human righteousness after the Fall? The apostle Paul picks up on this theme in Romans 3, where he makes it clear that both Jews and Gentiles are in the same position before God: sinners in need of divine grace. Isaiah 64 may be seen as an Old Testament precursor to Romans 3, pointing out our dilemma as sinners and yet not leaving us without hope.

**When was the last time you took a deep look at yourself, your thoughts, your innermost motives, and your desires? What did you see? How scary was it? What is your only hope?**

## The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Romans 6:1–13*

► **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Recognize the depths of our depravity and the complete perfection of Christ's gift of righteousness and right living.

**Feel:** Sense our deep need to be crucified in Christ and our need to be raised to life in Christ.

**Do:** Take hold of what Christ has done for us in covering us with His righteousness and press onward, daily surrendering our wills to Him.

► **Learning Outline:**

**I. Know: No Threads of Our Own**

**A** Why is it so important to recognize that all of our best efforts cannot bring us salvation?

**B** As we examine the perfection of Christ's generous gift of righteousness in contrast with our depravity, what are we drawn to conclude?

**II. Feel: Longing for the Robe Woven in Heaven**

**A** How does the contrast between our imperfections and Christ's perfect goodness make us feel?

**B** How are our longings to be clothed satisfied by the acceptance of Christ's robe of righteousness, and how do we articulate our joy?

**III. Do: A Daily Choice**

**A** What is the connection between accepting the righteous robe of Christ, woven in heaven, and living His life of obedience here on earth? What must we do daily in order to live with Christ?

► **Summary:** Christ's robe of righteousness is a gift, undeserved and unmerited. However, we must accept its provisions, daily surrendering our wills, wants, and desires to God. We must allow Christ to live out His own will, wants, and desires in our lives.

## Imputed Righteousness

No question, any honest Christian who looks at himself or herself, particularly in contrast to the righteousness of God, especially as revealed through Christ, will see something pretty scary. Not much there to commend oneself toward God, is there? In fact, there's nothing at all, nothing but "filthy rags."

What hope, then, do we have? A great hope, actually, and the theological term for that hope is *imputed righteousness*. What does it mean? Very simply, it's the perfect righteousness of Jesus, the righteousness that was "woven in the loom of heaven" and granted to us by faith. "Imputed righteousness" means the substitution of His *sinless* life for our *sinful* life. It is credited to us, outside of us, and it covers us completely. We are viewed in God's eyes as if we have never sinned, as if we have always been completely obedient to God's commands, as if we were as holy and righteous as Jesus Himself.

**Read** Romans 4:1–7. How does Abraham's trust in God illustrate imputed righteousness?

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Paul said in Romans 4:2 that if Abraham were justified by works, he could have boasted. However, Abraham believed God, and therefore, he was accounted righteous. Jesus invites us to come to Him in simple belief, sinners though we are, and He will provide His robe of perfection, the perfect righteousness that He wrought out in His life while here in the flesh. That's known as imputed righteousness, and it's the only solution to the dilemma so graphically depicted in Isaiah 64 and Romans 3.

Imagine it like this: Jesus strips away your old stained garments, your filthy rags, and wraps you in the robe of His perfect righteousness, His perfect holiness, His perfect record of law-keeping. He wraps you in it and then whispers in your ear, "Now you are perfect. I have given you My perfection. Please wear this robe, and don't let it slip away from you."

**What is the greatest gift anyone ever gave you? How did the gift make you feel, especially if you didn't do anything to deserve it? How much more grateful should we be, then, for the gift of righteousness that Jesus offers us?**

## Learning Cycle

### ► **STEP 1—Motivate**

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** However good we may think we are, or may seem to others, our goodness ultimately has no merit toward salvation. We are all sinners in need of the divine grace symbolized in the Bible as Christ’s robe of perfect righteousness.

**Just for Teachers:** Emphasize that, although it is impossible for us to be good on our own, we can be seen as good by God if we allow ourselves to be clothed by Christ’s righteousness. This should motivate us to become more like Christ in actual fact, for which the theological term is *sanctification*, or being made holy.

What if your whole life were to be judged by your worst moment—the worst thing you’ve ever done, or your most selfish, vile thought? Perhaps it’s something no other living human being knows about, something that would cause others to avoid or ostracize you. Or maybe it’s just horribly embarrassing and not really representative of who you are. “That’s not me anymore,” you say. “Ask me about the orphan in Bangladesh whom I’m putting through school.”

OK, what about the orphan in Bangladesh you’re putting through school? What about all the other things you’ve done that helped your community and humanity at large? All those years of no smoking, no drinking, and no drug using, even when others thought it made you “weird” or “boring”; the lifetime of faithful church attendance when all your cool friends were bashing organized religion and talking about how they were “spiritual, but not religious”? That should count for something, even be weighed against the bad things, shouldn’t it?

Unfortunately, it doesn’t. In fact, from God’s point of view, the good things we do (virtually indistinguishable from the bad things) are described in the Bible as filthy rags. Is that fair? After all, you did your best. But God requires perfection, and you’re not perfect. He has every right to leave it like that. Instead, He offers us all the opportunity to exchange our filthy rags for the robe of His perfect righteousness, given to us by the saving life, death, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ.

**Discuss With the Class:** God could view each one of us as a failed experiment; instead, He sacrifices Himself to give us something we don’t have and could never have on our own. What should our response be, and why?

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## Without the Law

A preacher stood before a congregation and declared, “Jesus Christ has changed my life. I am a radically new and different person than I was before.

“However, after 25 years of being a Christian, if there is one truth that my experience has taught me—an experience judged and tested by the Word of God—it is this: if, in the end, I am to be saved, if I do indeed ‘endure to the end,’ as Jesus said, and I make it into God’s eternal kingdom, then there isn’t a doubt in my mind that it will be only because I am covered in the robe of Christ’s righteousness, a righteousness that is woven in the loom of heaven and that covers me completely. I can overcome sin, and through the grace of God I have had many victories; I can overcome character defects, and through the grace of God I have; I can learn to love all sorts of people, even my enemies, and through the grace of God I am learning to.

“All that being said, I know that none of that is anywhere near good enough. Unless I am covered by the righteousness of Jesus, a righteousness credited to me by faith, apart from my obedience to the law, then at the end of the thousand years, you can stand on the wall of the holy city and wave down to me, because I know I won’t be there with you. I *can’t* be there with you.”

**Read** Romans 3:21–31. What is Paul saying here, and how are the ideas presented in these verses reflected in what the preacher quoted above said?

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Although Paul was addressing a specific group with a specific issue, his point is relevant to everyone, Jews and Gentiles. Today, for us as Seventh-day Adventists who believe in the perpetuity of the law, it’s especially important. The righteousness that saves us, the righteousness that we as sinners need covering us like a garment, is a righteousness that has been made manifest “without the law.” In other words, it’s the righteousness of Jesus, the righteousness of His life, the righteousness that brings us “the redemption that is Christ Jesus.” The redemption is in Him, it is found in Him, not in ourselves or in our law-keeping, and this redemption becomes ours by faith.

**What has been your experience with law-keeping? Have you ever sensed that your best efforts at obedience were making you right before God? What are the implications of your answer? Bring your response to class on Sabbath and defend your position.**

*Learning Cycle* CONTINUED► **STEP 2—Explore**

**Just for Teachers:** Emphasize that the Bible draws a clear distinction between righteousness that comes from God and righteousness that we humans fabricate in order to feel better about ourselves and our lost condition. On the outside they may appear identical. But human righteousness is ultimately superficial. It comes from a confused jumble of motives and is ultimately ineffectual. The righteousness of God, on the other hand, leads to salvation, both for ourselves and for those with whom we come in contact.

## Bible Commentary

### I. Righteousness Like Filthy Rags (*Review Isaiah 64:5–7 with your class.*)

Prophets such as Isaiah are best known for being spoken to by God and for relaying the message. But the relationship was not unilateral. Prophets also spoke to God. Perhaps what distinguished them was their willingness to seek God out in what we would call prayer and their greater-than-average desire to hear an answer. In any case, there are many examples of prophets talking to God, and this passage is one.

This is important because it is not God who is telling Isaiah that his righteousness is like filthy rags, but Isaiah himself who is coming to that realization. Isaiah is speaking for his people, most of whom do not yet realize this fact. Collectively, Isaiah's people have known that no god—or anything else on earth—has done for anyone what the God of Israel has done for His people. Yet they've still willfully decided to ignore Him and His righteousness, attempting to formulate their own righteousness, which—they think—would allow them to achieve salvation apart from God.

When it comes time for the system they have constructed to be put to the test, it proves to be worthless, not what it claimed to be at all, and devoid of power.

People in that position might well think that God has abandoned them. But really, it was they who have abandoned God. However far we may go from God, God calls us back and will use any means necessary and available to draw us to Him.

**Consider This:** Have you ever left God behind without even realizing it? Perhaps you wanted something that was incompatible with God, but you convinced yourself that you could have God *and* . . . Or maybe you abandoned or ignored God for something that was good in itself but not up

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## Clothes Make the Man

An author wrote a short story about two small-time crooks trying to pull off a robbery. In the plan, one of the crooks was to dress up in a policeman's uniform and stand in front of the place to be robbed. That way, with him there, no one would be suspicious while his partner pulled off the heist itself. The story ended, however, with the disguised partner apprehending and arresting his partner. Dressed as a cop, he started to act like one!

This story makes a point relevant to our topic. Yes, by faith we are covered in the righteousness of Christ, His "robe of righteousness" as it is called. We now are born again and have a new life in Christ. No question, then, that our lives will reflect the garment that we wear.

In receiving Christ's robe of righteousness, we have made a 100 percent commitment to let Him work His attributes of character into our lives. We are justified by grace, the work of a moment, and also have been given a power to obey that is assimilated over time and described as the work of a lifetime. Why would we ask for more? "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (*Phil. 4:13, NKJV*). Certainly that would mean, if nothing else, the power to obey His law.

**Read** Romans 6:1–13. What do these texts say about what kind of life we are to live, now that we are covered, "clothed," by the righteousness of Jesus?

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Paul is very clear here about the radical, life-changing impact that will happen to someone who has "been crucified" with Jesus. Notice the life-and-death imagery here; there's nothing halfway. Our old person, the person in those filthy rags, has died; a new person is born, one clothed in the righteousness of Jesus, a righteousness that is made manifest so that we can now "walk in the newness of life." This newness means that we are no longer to let sin reign in us. We have been given many promises of victory; the question is, Will we claim them for ourselves?

**What aspects of your life reveal the reality of your experience with God? In what areas are you struggling? How can you make the choice daily to die to self and live the new life in Christ that is offered us?**



Learning Cycle CONTINUED

to the task of being your personal savior. Inevitably, the time comes when one has to evaluate one's choices and decide whether what one has trusted was worthy of the trust. Only God passes the test every time. Discuss what this means with your class.

## II. Covered (Review Romans 4:7, 8 with your class.)

“Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered” (NIV). This statement, appearing in Romans 4:7 as a quotation of Psalm 32:1, is remarkable more for what is *not* said than what is said. The word used here and translated as *blessed* means “happy” in the original Hebrew. *Happy* can refer to the feeling of happiness, but it also refers to good fortune. He or she whose sins are forgiven and covered feels joy and relief at the good fortune of God's grace. God's grace is not a matter of chance or circumstance, but it is so different from what we might expect it to be that it seems like good fortune to us. Also, like good fortune or circumstance, we have nothing to do with it. We cannot put God in a better mood by donating more money or sacrificing a goat. God forgives us and covers our sins because He is God, and that is His character.

We might expect the verse to say, “Blessed is he or she who has no sin.” But then it would take on a completely different meaning. Few of us would deny that we would be happy if we never sinned and did not have to face the consequences of our own, or others', transgressions. But none of us could say that. If the passage did read as above, it would be holding up a standard no one could reach. *Blessedness* would also have a different meaning. It would mean, essentially, that God recognizes and rewards your achievement of a sinless state, if such a thing were possible.

Happy are we that we have a God who forgives our sins and helps us to overcome them, rather than a God who merely hands us a map and says, “I hope you make it!”

**Consider This:** We all have various circumstances in our lives. But as this verse tells us, what really matters is that our sins are forgiven and that we have fellowship with God. How can this knowledge help us to face the inevitable sorrow and suffering that will confront us as human beings living in an imperfect world?

## ► STEP 3—Apply

**Just for Teachers:** Use the following questions and exercises to

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## Cheap Grace and Legalism

All throughout the Bible, the inspired writers emphasize the need for obedience. To think that it doesn't matter what we do as long as Christ lives in our hearts is a fallacy. If Christ truly lives in our hearts, good actions must, inevitably, follow. At the same time, it's no less fatal to think that we can be saved by our own works of obedience.

Paul wrote a very impressive list of his life, accomplishments, and pedigree before he met Jesus: he was circumcised on the eighth day, he was a descendant of Israel, he was a Pharisee, he had zeal, and he said he was faultless. Talk about legalism. After his conversion, he called these things rubbish compared to knowing Christ. He gained righteousness by accepting the robe of Christ's righteousness, and he wanted to become like Him.

**Read** Philippians 3:3–16. How is Paul expressing the great truth of salvation by faith and what it means in the life of the one saved?

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We must keep distinct, theologically, the imputed righteousness of Christ (the righteousness that justifies us) from the work that the Holy Spirit does within us to change us. We never must separate them in the context of what it means to be a Christian. We must have both. To have the first without the second is like having a coin with only one side. It doesn't exist.

The understanding that obedience comes as a gift keeps us out of two ditches: cheap grace and legalism. First, we will believe in the importance of obeying, and second, our obedience will not be meritorious because we will have received it as a gift. We are just as dependent upon Christ to obey the law and to be sanctified as we are on Him to be justified and forgiven before God. God is more than willing—He's eager not only to justify us but to give us the victory over sin and self. As always, the wild card remains our will: how willing are we to make the daily surrender of self to Him so that we “know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death”? (*Phil. 3:10, NIV*).

**Read over the texts for today again. Where do you see the reality of human free will? What does Paul mean in verse 16 when he says, “let us live up to what we have already attained”? (*NIV*). What choices can you make that will allow you to do just that?**

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

**emphasize the need for all of us to claim Christ's robe of righteousness in order to be accepted by God.**

**Thought Questions:**

**1** Let's face it: the message of our own inadequacy to win favor with God and the necessity of claiming Christ's life and death on our behalf is not new to most of us. Let's also face the fact that we need to be reminded of it more often than not. Why is it so hard to integrate this realization into our ordinary lives and thoughts?

**2** Reread the statement from the preacher in Tuesday's study. In it the preacher notes that he has won many victories over sin in his life with Christ's help. Yet, no matter how many victories he has won, or continues to win, it can never be enough.

**Application Question:**

In Christian theology, justification is the name of the legal status in which we are said to be not guilty of sin because of the substitution of Christ's life for ours in the eyes of God the Judge. Sanctification is the process by which we actually become more holy. How does the knowledge of your justification help you to achieve a more sanctified life?

► **STEP 4—Create**

**Just for Teachers:** Perhaps the key idea in this lesson is the substitution of Christ's record of perfect sinlessness and obedience to the law for our sin and disobedience. The following activities are meant to emphasize the necessity of accepting the new clothing offered by Christ for our justification, sanctification, and salvation.

The idea of having one's appearance, one's home, and so on, "made over" is popular at the present time. It has even been the theme of several reality television programs. Ask the class, "How has your relationship with Jesus allowed you to be made over?" In this instance the emphasis would be on positive changes that have occurred in one's life. Of course, you want to keep focused on Jesus and gratitude to Him rather than self-glorification for bringing about these changes.

**An alternative:** Ask the class members to consider areas of their lives in which they might still need to be made over. Suggest that they take note of those areas and make them a topic of focused prayer in the coming days, weeks, or months, and that they look for changes.

**Further Study:** Read Ellen G. White, “The Testing Process,” pp. 88, 89, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4; “Righteousness by Faith,” p. 161, in *Gospel Workers*; “Faith and Acceptance,” pp. 49–55, in *Steps to Christ*.

“The law requires righteousness,—a righteous life, a perfect character; and this man has not to give. He cannot meet the claims of God’s holy law. But Christ, coming to the earth as man, lived a holy life, and developed a perfect character. These He offers as a free gift to all who will receive them. His life stands for the life of men. Thus they have remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God. More than this, Christ imbues men with the attributes of God. He builds up the human character after the similitude of the divine character, a goodly fabric of spiritual strength and beauty. Thus the very righteousness of the law is fulfilled in the believer in Christ. God can ‘be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.’ Rom. 3:26.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 762.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Read again the Ellen G. White quote given for Sabbath. Write out a paraphrase of what she is saying, and bring it to class on Sabbath. Listen to each other’s versions, and share your own. What main points come through?
- 2 In class, discuss your answer to Tuesday’s final question.
- 3 When we put on the robe of Christ’s righteousness, we “who . . . reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory” (see 2 Cor. 3:18, NIV). Describe what it means to reflect the Lord’s glory.
- 4 Over the years, some church members have struggled with the question of assurance of salvation. How are we to understand what it means to have assurance? Where is that assurance to be found? How does the imagery of a robe of righteousness woven “in the loom of heaven” without a thread of human devising help us to understand where our assurance can come from? How can we know we’re not being presumptuous if we have that assurance?
- 5 Why is it so important to maintain a theological distinction between what Christ has done for us, in that He justifies and forgives us the moment we claim it by faith, and what He works out in us over our lifetime? What dangers arise if we don’t keep that distinction sharp?