

God's Christ—My Righteousness

- 1 God's Christ, who is my righteousness,
My beauty is, my glorious dress;
Midst flaming worlds, in this arrayed,
With joy shall I lift up my head.
- 2 Lord, I believe Thy precious blood,
Which, at the mercy seat of God,
Forever doth for sinners plead,
For me, e'en for my soul, was shed.
- 3 Lord, I believe were sinners more
Than sands upon the ocean shore,
Thou hast for all a ransom paid,
For all a full redemption made.
- 4 Bold can I stand in every way,
For who aught to my charge shall lay?
Fully, by Thee, absolved I am
From sin and fear, from guilt and shame.
- 5 This spotless robe the same appears,
When ruined nature sinks in years;
No age can change its glorious hue,
Its glory is forever new.
- 6 Thou God of power, Thou God of love,
Let all Thy saints Thy mercy prove;
Our beauty this, our glorious dress,
Jesus the Lord, our Righteousness. (*Hymns*, #295)

Count Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf composed the original stanzas of this hymn in 1739 while making a sea voyage from Saint Thomas, West Indies, and he was filled with appreciation for the blood and righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. He originally wrote, "Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness / My beauty are, my glorious dress; / Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed, / With joy shall I lift up my head." He had the firm assurance that he would be fully "absolved...from sin and fear, from guilt and shame" because of the blood and righteousness of Christ. He well knew that the Scriptures portray a coming day of fiery judgment: "The day of the Lord will come as a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the elements, burning with intense heat, will be dissolved, and the earth and the works in it will be burned up" (2 Pet. 3:10). Yet he could boldly proclaim that when the entire universe is engulfed in the flames of God's judgment, he, arrayed in the blood and righteousness of Christ, would lift up his head with joy!

Although the poetic utterance is arresting, the thought inspiring, and the stirring music matches the exultant declaration, the thought in the original hymn fails to capture the complete revelation of Christ's redemptive work. The astonishing fact revealed in the Scriptures is that God Himself in Christ becomes our righteousness and glorious covering through faith in Him. According to 1 Corinthians 1:30, God has placed us into Christ Jesus, "who became wisdom to us from God: both righteousness and sanctification and redemption." It is not merely that the attributes of Christ's blood and righteousness have been applied to us as our beauty and our glorious dress; instead, the Bible unveils that *Christ Himself*—the incarnate God—has become our robe of righteousness, having been applied to us by the direct action of God. As believers in Christ, we have been eternally justified before God in this wonderful person, Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In the mid-1960s, several changes were made to this hymn before its inclusion in *Hymns* in order to reflect the clear speaking of God in His word. The first stanza was improved to read, "God's Christ who is my righteousness, / My beauty is, my glorious dress." Thus, the hymn illuminates the glorious fact that the covering that beautifies us is God's Christ rather than His actions or attributes. Correspondingly, the final stanza was changed to reflect this same truth, concluding the hymn with jubilant praise, "Our beauty this, our glorious dress, / Jesus the Lord, our Righteousness."

Witness Lee explains in a separate publication the scriptural rationale for such a change:

Many Christians say incorrectly that they have the righteousness of Christ. We should not say this. Our righteousness is not the righteousness of Christ; it is Christ Himself. Christ Himself as a Person, not His attribute of righteousness, has been made the righteousness of God to us (1 Cor. 1:30). Do not say that the righteousness of Christ has become your righteousness. Instead you should say, "Christ is my righteousness. My righteousness before God is the living Person of Christ, not an attribute. The righteous Christ is mine." God has made Christ, who is the very embodiment of God Himself, our righteousness. (Lee, *Romans* 49-50)

To fully appreciate and enter into the rich instruction and comprehensive supply of this hymn, we need to spend

some time considering the scriptural portions which unveil Jesus Christ as our righteousness for our beautification and glorious dress. As referenced above, 1 Corinthians 1 concludes with Paul's remarkable appraisal of those who have been called and chosen in God's economy:

Consider your calling, brothers, that there are not many wise according to flesh, not many powerful, not many wellborn. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world that He might shame those who are wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world that He might shame the things that are strong, and the lowborn things of the world and the despised things God has chosen, things which are not, that He might bring to nought the things which are, so that no flesh may boast before God. *But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became wisdom to us from God: both righteousness and sanctification and redemption.* (vv. 26-30, emphasis added)

Unquestionably we possess nothing in which we can place our confidence—we are the unqualified, the disenfranchised, the incapable, and the despised ones of the world. Bluntly speaking, we are not only the lowborn of the world; we were also “apart from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of the promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12-13).

In Luke 15 there is a picture of Christ becoming the covering of an unrighteous and unfaithful prodigal. The Lord Jesus used this parable concerning the return of the prodigal son in order to teach the self-righteous Pharisees and scribes. The Father receives the repentant sinner by providing him with a number of rich items of salvation. Among these items is a robe, signifying Christ the Son as righteousness who becomes the covering of the repentant sinner by replacing the soiled garment of his own righteousness (Isa. 64:6). When we come to the Lord for forgiveness and saving grace, we have already exhausted our own resources. We must rely only on God's mercy to receive us. We believe, and on this basis God justifies us (Rom. 3:24-26). We are placed into this wonderful Savior. Through the gracious execution of God's mercy, the sinful and hopeless who cast themselves upon the forgiving compassion of God and believe into the Savior receive Him as the robe of righteousness.

After we were called, we believed. To believe means to believe into. To believe Jesus does not simply mean to believe that there is a Jesus. To believe Jesus means to believe into Jesus; to believe God is to believe into God. Believing requires us to admit that we are hopeless and helpless and that we can do nothing to please God. We need to forget ourselves and terminate ourselves, terminating all that we are, have, and do. This is believing. On the negative side, believing means to terminate all

that we are, all that we have, and all that we can do. On the positive side, it means to take God as our everything, to put ourselves into God, trusting in what He has done for us, in what He can do for us, and what He will do for us. In other words, believing is simply terminating ourselves and putting ourselves into the full trust of God. This believing is reckoned before God as righteousness and binds God to save us. (Lee, *Romans* 25)

Our believing, however, is much more than the mental acknowledgement of faith in God as a forgiving and loving Father who gave His only Son for our salvation. Our believing is a believing *into* the person of the Son—we enter into the reality of an organic union in which we receive this living person as the covering of God's righteousness. Christ and the believer become one entity before God. Now we dare to proclaim, “I am as righteous as Christ is.” He is my righteousness. As the Scriptures declare, “Him who did not know sin He made sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21).

Obviously God cannot assign righteousness to a person, even a believing person, simply as a virtue to make him

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acceptable to God. The righteousness of God is all that God is in His rightness and justice in doing things. The righteousness of Christ is His personal attribute—His being right and doing right before God and man. The attribute of righteousness belonging to God and Christ cannot be freely bestowed on unrighteous men. To do so would make God unrighteous. Paul's burden in Romans 3:24-26 is to show us that God's way of redeeming us is a “legal” way, a way of righteousness:

Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God set forth as a propitiation place through faith in His blood, for the demonstrating of His righteousness, in that in His forbearance God passed over the sins that had previously occurred, with a view to the demonstrating of His righteousness in the present time, so that He might be righteous and the One who justifies him who is of the faith of Jesus.

Watchman Nee observes, “God does not want us to think that after we are saved our salvation is an illegal one. God would not have man harbor such criticisms. God wants to

show us that there is nothing illegal or unrighteous in His ways” (Nee, *Gospel* 84).

God’s way of redemption, therefore, involves three matters—love, sin, and righteousness; these three cannot easily exist together. God loves man and wants to save him. Man is sinful and cannot stand before God; he must be condemned as unrighteous. If God forgives man simply based on His love for man, God will be found to be unrighteous. God must work out His love for man who is sinful to save him while at the same time preserving His own righteousness. He accomplished this through the work of redemption carried out by, in, and through the Lord Jesus. God loved the world to such an extent that He gave His only begotten Son to die on behalf of sinful men. Through the death of Christ, God is now able to justify those who believe into Him. Christ becomes their righteousness and glorious dress.

God’s Way of Making Christ Our Righteousness

In His way of redemption God did not merely substitute Christ for us in the way of exchanging positions. He placed us into Christ, uniting and joining us to Him (2 Cor. 5:21). Certainly it is true that Christ died for us; we often use the terms *substitutionary* or *vicarious sacrifice* when referring to Christ’s redemptive work on the cross. But it must become flawlessly and unambiguously plain to us that in the application of the redemption to man, the Bible never says that we have changed positions with Christ.

As far as our personal gain is concerned, it is true that Christ died for us. But in God’s redemption, if we said that Christ only stood in the position of the sinners in order to die for us, it would make God unrighteous. Christ is clearly righteous; how can God condemn Him as unrighteous? We are clearly sinners; how can God reckon us as righteous? In God’s redemption, Christ and we do not exchange positions; rather, we are united. (Nee, *Questions* 103)

What then happened on the cross? He was made sin on our behalf. He did not carry our sins as a weight outside of Himself for us. He became a genuine man in the likeness of the flesh of sin, and based on the fact of His union with man, He was “made sin” for us (2 Cor. 5:21). God thus condemned sin in the flesh, that is, in the flesh of the incarnated Son. God judged Him as sin and punished Him as sin (Rom. 8:3). And at the same time that He put Christ to death, He also put us to death through this same union. Watchman Nee summarizes this act of God in His redemption as follows:

In God’s way of redemption, we should understand three aspects: (1) God and man, (2) God for man, and (3) God

in man. First, the union of God and man enabled God to accomplish redemption. Second, God accomplished redemption for man. Third, God worked what He accomplished into man. The Lord Jesus’ incarnation is the union of God and man. This is the meaning of God and man. Because there was a union of God and man, the Lord Jesus was able to die for us, resurrect for us, and become the mighty Savior. In order for God to dwell in man, God sent His Holy Spirit from heaven. While He was on earth, the Lord was clothed with flesh. But now He is dwelling in us and is clothed with the Spirit. Therefore, some say that the Holy Spirit is the Lord Jesus Christ in another form. The Holy Spirit comes to work in us and accomplish all that God has accomplished in us. If there were not God and man, there could not have been God for man or God in man. If the Lord Jesus had not been born as a man, He could never have died. When He died on the cross, the Lord Jesus did not bear the sin of the world as a third party; He was made sin and died for us with the qualification of being a man. On one hand, God has laid our sins on the Lord, and therefore, the Lord bore our sins; but on the other hand, in God’s way of redemption, God judged both us and sin when He judged the Lord Jesus. Today we thank God for the fact that Jesus Christ was made sin for us on the cross. (*Questions* 104)

Being Our Beauty and Our Glorious Dress

What is the significance of Christ, our righteousness, as our beauty and our glorious dress? In the Old Testament Moses was instructed: “You shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for glory and for beauty” (Exo. 28:2). It may be based on this portion of the Word that Zinzendorf used the expression concerning our beauty and our glorious dress. We know that in typology garments signify expression. In the case of Aaron, the garments were the priestly garments which qualified him to be a serving priest. The garments of Aaron signify Christ as the beauty and glory of the one who expresses Christ in His divine glory and in His human beauty.

The priestly garments, being mainly for glory and for beauty, signify the expression of Christ’s divine glory and human beauty. Glory is related to Christ’s divinity, His divine attributes (John 1:14; Heb. 1:3), and beauty, to Christ’s humanity, His human virtues. Christ’s divinity, typified by the gold of the priestly garments, is for glory, and His humanity, typified by the blue, purple, and scarlet strands and the fine linen, is for beauty. A life that expresses Christ with the divine glory and the human beauty sanctifies us and qualifies us to be the priesthood. (Recovery Version, Exo. 28:2, note 2)

When we were put into Christ, we were clothed with Christ as an organic garment making us acceptable to

God and qualifying us to participate in His eternal purpose. Such a garment also enables us to express Christ for His satisfaction.

The Precious Blood of Christ in Its Effectiveness

Stanza 2 acclaims the blood of Christ: “Lord, I believe Thy precious blood, / Which, at the mercy seat of God, / Forever doth for sinners plead, / For me, e’en for my soul, was shed.” This stanza pays tribute to the preciousness and the effectiveness of the blood which has been sprinkled at the heavenly mercy seat of God. This thought is very closely related to the book of Hebrews. With His blood Christ entered once for all into the Holy of Holies and obtained an eternal redemption for us (9:12). Through this blood Christ purified the heavenly things which were typified by the earthly tabernacle (vv. 22-24). This blood “forever doth for sinners plead.” It purifies our conscience to serve the living God (v. 14), and it speaks something better for us than the blood of Abel (12:24). Through the blood we can boldly enter into the heavenly Holy of Holies (10:19).

The hymn’s reference to the soul—“for me, e’en for my soul”—may be related to Hebrews 6:18-20:

In order that by two unchangeable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we may have strong encouragement, we who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us, which we have as an anchor of the soul, both secure and firm and which enters within the veil, where the Forerunner, Jesus, has entered for us, having become forever a High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

The blood of Christ was taken into the heavenly Holy of Holies by Christ our High Priest and sprinkled on the heavenly mercy seat for our sins, thus providing us a secure and firm anchor for our soul in all circumstances and all situations.

Stanza 3 affirms the confidence of the writer that the blood of Christ is sufficient for all time and all people: “Lord, I believe were sinners more / Than sands upon the ocean shore, / Thou hast for all a ransom paid, / For all a full redemption made.” The apostle John affirms in his first Epistle that even though we should not sin, yet “if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for those of the whole world” (2:1-2). His propitiating accomplishment is sufficient for the sins of the whole world! Only one change has been made in this stanza—the word *redemption* is used instead of the original *atonement*. Atonement refers to the covering of sins which was accomplished by the blood of bulls and goats

in the Old Testament time. It does not remove the trespass; it only covers it with a view to the full removal of the sin through the redeeming Savior. Redemption, on the other hand, indicates *the removal of all sin and stain* from those who come forward to God through Christ. Hallelujah for the redemption accomplished for all time and all people! This redemption is more than enough to meet the demands of God on sinners and appease the relationship between us and God. It is adequate not only for our sins but for the sins of the whole world.

Stanza 4, as it was initially written, concentrates on that great day of the Lord, the day of His coming in His kingdom: “Bold shall I stand in Thy great day; / For who aught to my charge shall lay? / Fully absolved through these I am / From sin and fear, from guilt and shame.” As we have seen, Zinzendorf centered his faith on the effectiveness of the redeeming factors—the blood and the righteousness of Christ—to absolve him from sin and fear, from guilt and shame. Although we are eternally grateful for the shed blood, we must be firmly established in the fact that only our inclusion into Christ can present us blameless before the judgment throne. Therefore, the revised version of the hymn focuses on

*We are fully absolved—pardoned, forgiven,
cleared of all charges, released, and free
of all condemnation—because we have
Christ as our righteousness.*

our present living with and in the Redeemer Himself: “Bold can I stand in every way, / For who aught to my charge shall lay? / Fully, by Thee, absolved I am / From sin and fear, from guilt and shame.” “Fully, by Thee” should ever be the theme of our offerings of praise and thanksgiving to our Lord and Savior; in Him we stand boldly in every way now and in the future. Therefore, we are able with confidence to echo the challenge of the apostle, “Who shall bring a charge against God’s chosen ones?” (Rom. 8:33). In Romans 8 Paul argues that the God who did not spare His own Son but delivered Him up for us all is the One who now freely justifies us on the basis of His Son’s sacrifice; furthermore, Christ Jesus who died, who was raised, and who is seated at the right hand of God, is now interceding on our behalf before the Father. Since the Father and the Son are fully involved in our justification and acceptance, who can possibly bring a charge against us? Hallelujah! We are fully absolved—pardoned, forgiven, cleared of all charges, released, and free of all condemnation—because we have Christ as our righteousness!

Stanza 5 is a comparison of the fading glory of our “ruined nature” with the eternal glory of Christ. Human

nature and all of the old creation are becoming old and fading away like the grass of the field (Isa. 40:6-8; 51:12; Psa. 102:11; James 1:10-11; 1 Pet. 1:24). All human glory and beauty are short-lived and passing away. At the grave of her brother, Lazarus, Martha lamented that the Lord Jesus had not come sooner to prevent the death of her brother. But the Lord said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes into Me, even if he should die, shall live; and everyone who lives and believes into Me shall by no means die forever" (John 11:25-26). The resurrection life is perpetually new and renewing. The beauty and the covering glory which is the resurrected Christ as our righteousness never fades; "No age can change its glorious hue, / Its glory is forever new."

The original final stanza of the hymn was written: "O let the dead now hear Thy voice; / Now bid Thy banished ones rejoice; / Their beauty this, their glorious dress, / Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness." The thought of the writer seems to be that those who in hope have died and those who in faith have been exiled (perhaps a reference to the sojourning believers in the hostile environment of a world that hated the Savior and now hates His people, cf. John 15:18-20) will be called out to rejoice in the day of Christ's return. In the midst of death and persecution the believers are urged to take refuge in the hope of His coming when they will still rejoice in their enveloping protection of beauty and glory—the blood and righteousness of Jesus. But the final stanza of this hymn as it appears in *Hymns* proclaims, "Thou God of power, Thou God of love, / Let all Thy saints Thy mercy prove; / Our beauty this, our glorious dress, / Jesus the Lord, our Righteousness." If we are able to apprehend the rich nuances of these changes, we will realize that our hope is not merely in the objective virtues of the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ, as wonderful as these are; our hope rests rather on the God of power, who is able to accomplish all things for our redemption and justification, and on the God of love who is motivated to sacrifice all for our enduring salvation and full transformation in the Son's complete salvation. Our gaze is always fixed on our God who is ever for us, a present help in trouble who ceaselessly applies to us the efficacy of the complete redemptive covering of God's Christ—Jesus the Lord, our Righteousness!

Christ as Righteousness Interwoven in the Believers' Being

The great truth concerning Christ being righteousness from God to the believers actually has two aspects. We have already considered the first aspect regarding Christ as the objective righteousness for their justification before God through repenting and believing into Christ. The hymn we have reviewed focuses on this aspect.

However, there is another aspect, Christ as the believers' subjective righteousness for their preparation as the bride. In this aspect Christ is interwoven into the believers' being and lived out through them to be the manifestation of God in the flesh—the continuation of Christ living on the earth.

In his first Epistle, John the apostle writes,

Now, little children, abide in Him, so that if He is manifested, we may have boldness and not be put to shame from Him at His coming. If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone who practices righteousness also has been begotten of Him. (2:28-29)

A footnote referring to the word *practices* in verse 29 in the Recovery Version of the Bible is helpful:

This [to practice righteousness] is not to do righteousness occasionally and purposely as some particular act but to practice righteousness habitually and unintentionally as a common daily living. It is the same in 3:7. This is a spontaneous living that issues from the divine life within us, with which we have been begotten of the righteous God. Hence, it is a living expression of God, who is righteous in all His deeds and acts. It is not just an outward behavior but the manifestation of the inward life; not just an act of purpose but the flow of life from within the divine nature, of which we partake. This is the first condition of the life that abides in the Lord. It is all due to the divine birth, which is indicated by the word *has been begotten of Him* and the title *children of God* in the succeeding verse (3:1). (note 6)

We have been begotten of God. Since God is righteous, we can know and be assured that everyone who practices righteousness has been begotten of God. In chapter 3, John continues, "Everyone who has been begotten of God does not practice sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been begotten of God. In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest" (vv. 9-10). Through the divine birth, the divine seed has been sown into the being of every believer; the divine seed is the very essence of the life and nature of God. Since this seed is in the believer, he cannot sin. According to the context, *cannot sin* should be understood to mean cannot sin habitually. Two matters are the basis for the righteous living of the believer—he is begotten of God (therefore the divine seed containing the life and nature of God is in him), and he abides in God.

There is the promise and expectation in the Bible that after the initial experience of Christ becoming our righteousness for redemption, He will continue to infuse the divine life into our entire being day by day with the result

that we will gain Christ as the inward element for our righteous living. This element will saturate our mind, emotion, and will until we spontaneously live out a righteous living. We are born of God through the divine Spirit and now possess a spiritual life and nature: "That which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6). This is not a metaphoric expression used to designate a kind of radical change in one's world view. It is neither a description of a religious conversion. It is a fact that we have been born of God to become children of God (1:12-13). As children of God, we contain the life seed of God. Through the divine birth we were automatically brought into the divine life and the divine person. Therefore, we spontaneously abide in the Triune God. As those who are already dwelling in God, there is no need for us to exert our effort to dwell in Him. We simply need to remain in this abiding and not allow this abiding to be interrupted.

The active element of the divine birth and the divine abiding is Christ as the Spirit indwelling our human spirit. Christ became the life-giving Spirit, and this Spirit is now in our spirit to transmit the reality of what Christ is and has accomplished into our very being (1 Cor. 15:45; 6:17; cf. Rom 8:14-16). To remain or abide in this divine-human relationship is to set the mind on the spirit and enjoy the indwelling Spirit as life in our spirit and even as the transmission of life into our mortal body (vv. 6, 9-11). To abide in Him is also to put to death by the spirit the practices of the body (v. 13). This kind of living is a living in oneness, in the mingling with the Triune God which unconsciously produces a living in righteousness.

Eventually, we must experience Christ as our righteousness soaking and saturating our being for us to live by another life—the life of God lived out through us until we are fully clothed with the second garment typified in Psalm 45:13-14:

The king's daughter is all glorious within the royal abode; / Her garment is a woven work inwrought with gold. / She will be led to the King in embroidered clothing; / The virgins behind her, her companions, / Will be brought to You.

Typifying the church at the wedding day, the king's daughter has two garments. The first is "a woven work inwrought with gold," which signifies Christ as our objective righteousness for our acceptance before God in the redemption of Christ. The second garment is "embroidered clothing." What does this garment signify? It must indicate what is fulfilled in Revelation 19:7-8:

Let us rejoice and exult, and let us give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready. And it was given to her that she

should be clothed in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteousnesses of the saints.

His wife has made herself ready. She is clothed in her fine linen, and this fine linen is the righteousnesses of the saints. The use of the word *embroidered* in Psalm 45 is striking in that it indicates an interweaving, suggesting a day-by-day experience of Christ being "interwoven" into our being. Such a garment is required for our entrance into the wedding feast, as indicated in Matthew 22:11-14. This thought is briefly summarized by a footnote to verse 11 in the Recovery Version commenting on the absence of the wedding garment related to one of the attendants at the feast:

This wedding garment is typified by the embroidered garment in Psa. 45:14 and is signified by the fine linen in Rev. 19:8...This is the surpassing righteousness of the overcoming believers, mentioned in 5:20...The man not clothed with a wedding garment is saved, because he has come to the wedding feast. He has received Christ as his righteousness that he might be justified before God (1 Cor. 1:30; Rom. 3:26), but he has not lived Christ out as his subjective righteousness (Phil. 3:9) that he might

Two matters are the basis for the righteous living of the believer—he is begotten of God (the divine seed containing the life and nature of God is in him), and he abides in God.

participate in the enjoyment of the kingdom of the heavens. He has been called to salvation, but he has not been chosen for the enjoyment of the kingdom of the heavens, which is for the overcoming believers only. (note 1)

May all the believers in Christ have such an experience of Christ as righteousness.

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