

The Temple Garment: “An Outward Expression of an Inward Commitment”

Elder Carlos E. Asay
Emeritus Member of the First Quorum of the Seventy
Ensign, Aug. 1997, pp. 19-23

Through sacred covenants with the Lord, we receive promises of blessings and protection. He has given us a tangible reminder of our covenants.

A few years ago, in a seminar for new temple presidents and matrons, Elder James E. Faust, then of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, told about his being called to serve as a General Authority. He was asked only one question by President Harold B. Lee: “Do you wear the garments properly?” to which he answered in the affirmative. He then asked if President Lee wasn’t going to ask him about his worthiness. President Lee replied that he didn’t need to, for he had learned from experience that how one wears the garment is the expression of how the individual feels about the Church and everything that relates to it. It is a measure of one’s worthiness and devotion to the gospel.

There are some who would welcome a detailed dress code answering every conceivable question about the wearing of the temple garment. They would have priesthood leaders legislate lengths, specify conditions of when and how it should and should not be worn, and impose penalties upon those who missed the mark by a fraction of an inch. Such individuals would have Church members strain at a thread and omit the weightier matters of the gospel of Jesus Christ (see Matt. 23:23–26).

Most Latter-day Saints, however, rejoice over the moral agency extended them by a loving Father in Heaven. They prize highly the trust placed in them by the Lord and Church leaders—a trust implied in this statement made by the Prophet Joseph Smith: “I teach them correct principles, and they govern themselves.”¹

Samuel the Lamanite declared:

“And now remember, remember, my brethren, that whosoever perisheth, perisheth unto himself; and whosoever doeth iniquity, doeth it unto himself; for behold, ye are free; ye are permitted to act for yourselves; for behold, God hath given unto you a knowledge and he hath made you free.

“He hath given unto you that ye might know good from evil, and he hath given unto you that ye might choose life or death; and ye can do good and be restored unto that which is good, or have that which is good restored unto you; or ye can do evil, and have that which is evil restored unto you” (Hel. 14:30–31).

I believe there is a critical body of knowledge relating to the temple garment. When that knowledge is obtained, Latter-day Saints filled with faith wear the garment and

wear it properly, not because someone is policing their actions but because they understand the virtues of the sacred clothing and want to “do good and be restored unto that which is good.” On the other hand, when one does not understand the sacred nature of the temple garment, the tendency is to treat it casually and regard it as just another piece of cloth.

The critical body of knowledge associated with the garment of the holy priesthood may be categorized under three headings: Armor of God, Historical Background, and Teachings of Modern Prophets. I shall present some information pertaining to each of these headings, hoping that the thoughts shared will provoke a greater appreciation of the garment and stir a greater resolve in the minds of Saints to wear it willfully and properly.

Armor of God

We are at war! Our enemy is not an invading army from a bordering nation or a navy of some overseas power. Bullets are not whizzing above our heads, nor are bombs exploding in and around our homes. Nevertheless, we are engaged in a life-and-death struggle with forces capable of thrashing us inside out and sending us down into the depths of spiritual defeat if we are not vigilant.

I refer, of course, to the “wrestle” against principalities, powers, rulers of darkness, and spiritual wickedness in high places spoken of by the Apostle Paul (see Eph. 6:12). I refer to the onslaught of immorality, crime, substance abuse, and other insidious influences threatening our society. Such threatening influences, along with other imminent dangers, constitute “the wiles of the devil” (Eph. 6:11) against which we must stand in these “perilous times” (2 Tim. 3:1).

Paul counseled: “Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand” (Eph. 6:13). With his prophetic powers, Paul could foresee the wicked conditions that would exist on the earth in our modern day. Therefore, he urged all Saints to have their “loins girt about with truth” (Eph. 6:14), to put on “the breastplate of righteousness” (Eph. 6:14), to have their feet shod “with the preparation of the gospel of peace” (Eph. 6:15), to grasp “the shield of faith” (Eph. 6:16), to [page 20] place on their heads “the

helmet of salvation” (Eph. 6:17), to take “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph. 6:17), and to pray always (see Eph. 6:18) so that they might be preserved. He knew that armor made of truth, righteousness, faith, spirit, and prayer would protect people from the “fiery darts” (Eph. 6:16) crafted and thrown by Satan and his henchmen.

There is, however, another piece of armor worthy of our consideration. It is the special underclothing known as the temple garment, or garment of the holy priesthood, worn by members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who have received their temple endowment. This garment, worn day and night, serves three important purposes: it is a reminder of the sacred covenants made with the Lord in His holy house, a protective covering for the body, and a symbol of the modesty of dress and living that should characterize the lives of all the humble followers of Christ.

It is written that “the white garment symbolizes purity and helps assure modesty, respect for the attributes of God, and, to the degree it is honored, *a token of what Paul regarded as taking upon one the whole armor of God* (Eph. 6:13; cf. D&C 27:15). ... Garments bear several simple marks of orientation toward the gospel principles of obedience, truth, life, and discipleship in Christ.”²

Much, much more could be said about the war for the souls of men and the whole armor of God. The war on the earth began in the days of Adam, continued down through the years with Moses and the children of Israel, and still rages in a dispensation known as the fulness of times—a dispensation ushered in by the revelations received through the Prophet Joseph Smith. Hence, the issue of protective coverings enabling us to withstand the fiery darts of Satan will continue to be of great significance.

We must put on the armor of God spoken of by the Apostle Paul and [page 21] reiterated in a modern revelation (see D&C 27:15–18). We must also “put on the armor of righteousness” (2 Ne. 1:23) symbolized by the temple garment. Otherwise, we may lose the war and perish.

The heavy armor worn by soldiers of a former day, including helmets, shields, and breastplates, determined the outcome of some battles. However, the real battles of life in our modern day will be won by those who are clad in a spiritual armor—an armor consisting of faith in God, faith in self, faith in one’s cause, and faith in one’s leaders. The piece of armor called the temple garment not only provides the comfort and warmth of a cloth covering, it also strengthens the wearer to resist temptation, fend off evil influences, and stand firmly for the right.

Historical Background

It should be understood that “the things of the Lord” (2 Ne. 4:16) have included sacred clothing from the very beginning of this world. The scriptures contain many

references to the wearing of special garments by the ancients. Prior to their expulsion from the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were clad in sacred clothing. We read: “Unto Adam also and to his wife did the Lord God make coats of skins, and clothed them” (Gen. 3:21).

They received this clothing in a context of instruction on the Atonement, sacrifice, repentance, and forgiveness (see Moses 5:5–8). The temple garment given to Latter-day Saints is provided in a similar context. It is given to remind wearers of the continuing need for repentance, the need to honor binding covenants made in the house of the Lord, and the need to cherish and share virtue in our daily living so that promised blessings may be claimed.

Moses was commanded to place holy garments and priestly vestments upon Aaron and others, thus preparing them to officiate in the tabernacle. Said the Lord to Moses, “And take thou unto thee Aaron thy brother, and his sons with him, from among the children of Israel ... and thou shalt make holy garments for Aaron thy brother for glory and for beauty ... that he may minister unto me in the priest’s office” (Ex. 28:1–3).

References to Aaron’s clothing and the vestments of the priesthood worn by selected leaders in Old Testament times are accompanied by expressions such as “precious garments,” “glorious garments,” “garments of honor,” “coats of glory,” and “garments of salvation.”³ These expressions may apply more particularly to the raiment worn by those who officiated in tabernacle or temple rites; nevertheless, these descriptive words also apply to the sacred clothing worn on a daily basis by those “who call themselves by [God’s] name and are essaying to [become] saints” (D&C 125:2). The honor, glory, and precious nature of sacred garments, whether worn only in the temple or in everyday life under street clothes, transcends the material of which they are made. Their full worth and beauty is appreciated and regarded as precious or glorious when viewed through the “eye of faith” (Alma 5:15).

“The garment is inadequate without the thing that it signifies. ... It won’t protect you unless you’re true and faithful to your covenant, and only to the degree to which you don’t dishonor your garment has it any significance at all. Only on that condition that you don’t dishonor it, that you’re pure, that you are true and faithful to your covenant—does the garment have any benefit,” wrote Hugh Nibley, an emeritus professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University.⁴

Yes, garments have been worn by prophets and other righteous Saints throughout the ages, whenever the ordinances of the priesthood and the temple have been available to the children of men. When the Church was restored to the earth in our day, the sacred priesthood ordinances associated with the holy temple were revealed

anew to the Prophet Joseph Smith. The revelations he received included instructions about the garment.

Many references are found in the scriptures relating to garments and clothing. Enoch declared: "I beheld the heavens open, and I was clothed with glory" (Moses 7:3). Jacob spoke of a day of judgment when "we shall have a perfect knowledge of all our guilt, and our uncleanness, and our nakedness; and the righteous shall have a perfect knowledge of their enjoyment, and their righteousness, being clothed with purity, yea, even with the robe of righteousness" (2 Ne. 9:14). Isaiah rejoiced, saying, "God ... hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness" (Isa. 61:10). Alma referred to "all the holy prophets, whose garments are cleansed and are spotless, pure and white" (Alma 5:24). These and other prophetic statements suggest not only a cleanliness and purity within one's soul, but also a spotless covering over one's soul, signifying a life of goodness and devotion to God.

Teachings of Modern Prophets

I fear that too many Church members take for granted the promise of protection and blessings associated with the temple garment. Some wear it improperly, and others remove it to suit whims of circumstance. In such cases, the instructions of modern prophets, seers, and revelators are ignored and spiritual protection placed in jeopardy.

In a letter from the First Presidency dated 3 July 1974, Church members were reminded of the sacred [page 22] nature of the garment: "The sacredness of the garment should be ever present and uppermost in the wearer's mind; ... the blessings which flow from the observance of our covenants are sufficiently great to recompense for any mere inconvenience. To break our covenants is to forfeit the protection and blessings promised for obedience to them."⁵

And in a letter to priesthood leaders dated 10 October 1988, the First Presidency made the following important statements regarding how the garment should be worn: "Church members who have been clothed with the garment in the temple have made a covenant to wear it throughout their lives. This has been interpreted to mean that it is worn as underclothing both day and night. This sacred covenant is between the member and the Lord. Members should seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to answer for themselves any personal questions about the wearing of the garment. ... The promise of protection and blessings is conditioned upon worthiness and faithfulness in keeping the covenant.

"The fundamental principle ought to be to wear the garment and not to find occasions to remove it. Thus, members should not remove either all or part of the garment to work in the yard or to lounge around the home in swimwear or immodest clothing. Nor should they remove it

to participate in recreational activities that can reasonably be done with the garment worn properly beneath regular clothing. When the garment must be removed, such as for swimming, it should be restored as soon as possible.

"The principles of modesty and keeping the body appropriately covered are implicit in the covenant and should govern the nature of all clothing worn. Endowed members of the Church wear the garment as a reminder of the sacred covenants they have made with the Lord and also as a protection against temptation and evil. *How it is worn is an outward expression of an inward commitment to follow the Savior.*"⁶

President Joseph F. Smith had strong feelings about the proper wearing of the garment. Said he: "The Lord has given unto us garments of the holy priesthood, and you know what that means. And yet there are those of us who mutilate them, in order that we may follow the foolish, vain and (permit me to say) indecent practices of the world. In order that such persons may imitate the fashions, they will not hesitate to mutilate that which should be held by them the most sacred of all things in the world, next to their own virtue, next to their own purity of life. They should hold these things that God has given unto them sacred, unchanged and unaltered from the very pattern in which God gave them. Let us have the moral courage to stand against the opinions of fashion, and especially where fashion compels us to break a covenant and so commit a grievous sin."⁷

In his book, *The Holy Temple*, Elder Boyd K. Packer of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles explained succinctly why it is so important to wear the garment properly.

"The garment represents sacred covenants. It fosters modesty and becomes a shield and protection to the wearer.

"The wearing of such a garment does not prevent members from dressing in the fashionable clothing generally worn in nations of the world. Only clothing that is immodest or extreme in style would be incompatible with wearing the garment."⁸

What more needs to be said about the garment and the way it is to be worn and treated? The principles are stated clearly, and it is left to the wearers and their consciences to live accordingly. People of faith need not be commanded in all things for they do not endeavor to excuse themselves in the least point or over the absence of a Mosaic code of conduct. But rather, they govern their dress and behavior as God and his prophets have decreed, allowing the justice, mercy, and long-suffering of God to have full sway in their hearts (see Alma 42:29–31).

A Reminder We Carry

I like to think of the garment as the Lord's way of letting us take part of the temple with us when we leave. It

is true that we carry from the Lord's house inspired teachings and sacred covenants written in our minds and hearts. However, the one tangible remembrance we carry with us back into the world is the garment. And though we cannot always be in the temple, a part of it can always be with us to bless our lives.

Don't forget that the word *garment* is used symbolically in the scriptures and gives expanded meaning to other words such as *white, clean, pure, righteous, modesty, covering, ceremonial, holy, priesthood, beautiful, perfection, salvation, undefiled, worthy, white raiment, shield, protection, spotless, blameless, armor, covenants, promises, blessings, respect, eternal life*, and so forth. All of these words occupy special places in the vocabularies of people sincerely essaying to become Saints.

Of one choice group of believers, it is written, "Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy.

"He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels" (Rev. 3:4-5).

How wonderful it would be if all Church members

walked with God in white and were numbered with the Saints in Sardis!

Remember always that our very salvation depends, symbolically, upon the condition of our garments. The prophet Alma told the members of the Church in his day that they could not be saved unless their garments were symbolically washed, cleansed, and made white through the blood of Jesus Christ. He taught:

"No man [can] be saved except his garments are washed white; yea, his garments must be purified until they are cleansed from all stain, through the blood of him of whom it has been spoken by our fathers, who should come to redeem his people from their sins. ...

"Have ye walked, keeping yourselves blameless before God? Could ye say, if ye were called to die at this time, within yourselves, that ye have been sufficiently humble? That your garments have been cleansed and made white through the blood of Christ, who will come to redeem his people from their sins?" (Alma 5:21, 27).

It is my prayer that our garments will be cleansed through the blood of Christ and that we will reaffirm in our minds and hearts the declaration "Zion must increase in beauty, and in holiness, ... and put on her beautiful garments" (D&C 82:14).

References

1. As quoted by John Taylor, *Millennial Star*, 15 Nov. 1851, 339.
2. Evelyn T. Marshall, "Garments," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow 5 vols. (1992), 2:534; emphasis added.
3. *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:534.
4. "Sacred Vestments: A Preliminary Report," *Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies* [1986], 13.
5. First Presidency Letter, 3 July 1974.
6. First Presidency Letter, 10 Oct. 1988; emphasis added.
7. *Improvement Era*, Aug. 1906, 813.
8. *The Holy Temple* (1980), 75.