

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Broadcast Date: 7 January 2018

No. T1023

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The significance of colours in the Bible: Purple

Good morning and welcome to *Truth for Today*, where we are continuing with our series on colours in Scripture. Last week my colleague, Jonathan Hughes, looked at the colour blue, whereas, today I shall be centring my thoughts on the colour purple. Before entering on to my subject however, I would like, on behalf of the *Truth for Today* team, to wish you all a very peaceful New Year and that you may know God's presence with you every day of 2018. Now, to proceed with our subject, I shall try to ascertain some basic facts of the colour purple in a Scriptural context.

The first ever mention of purple, in the Scriptures, is in Exodus 25:1-4, which I shall now read from the New King James version: *"Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 'Speak to the children of Israel, that they bring me an offering. From everyone who gives it willingly with his heart you shall take My offering. And this is the offering which you take from them: gold, silver and bronze; blue, purple and scarlet thread, fine linen, goats' hair'"*

The list continues with at least another six items that can be given (see Exodus 25:6-7), but we have mentioned sufficient to give a sense of the materials that the Israelites required to make the Tabernacle, or the sanctuary for God, within their midst. As James McBroom has written regarding the Tabernacle, mainly from Exodus 30: "Exodus 30 shows the material required for making the sanctuary which speaks of the holy universal order. The cloth and the colours, as well as other elements both for the house itself and the priestly robes indicate that God would dwell in a scene of holy splendour and be the centre of delight for a redeemed and worshipping people" (McBroom, J: *"The Glories of Our Lord"*)

There are many Christians who consider that the various materials and colours, associated with the Tabernacle, are pictures that illustrate some of the beauties and glories of the Lord Jesus. For instance, the Schofield Reference Bible suggests that blue stands for heavenly in origin, scarlet for sacrifice and purple for royalty. I shall, in the course of our time together, endeavour to link the colour "purple" to royalty.

I trust that you noticed from Exodus 25:1-4 that "purple" is one of the items that would be needed when the skilled workers began to construct the sanctuary. The first point that I want to make regarding Exodus 25:1-4 is that the materials were given freely by God's people as an offering to Him. Are we as free with our possessions and time, or do we act in a selfish way, when a call comes to express our loyalty and devotion to the Lord Jesus? If our giving, whether of time or wealth, is an index of the depth of our faith then are we shallow or great in faith? Secondly, as Dr. Edersheim points out, the various coloured yarns, along with the gold, silver and other precious materials, taught the Israelites that the sanctuary had to be a suitable place to meet with their God. This, I would judge, demonstrates the valuable nature of the purple cloth, which would be beautiful to behold and very decorative. Consequently, it would be prized and therefore purchased only by rich and influential people. Surely this would deny the idea that anything is good enough for God.

Another point I want to make, concerning this Scripture from Exodus 25:1-4, is that the colour "purple" was, with the other colours mentioned, connected with the sacred Tabernacle which, AJ Pollock in his book *The Tabernacle's Typical Teaching*, (ISBN: 9780901860651) describes as, "...deep in spiritual meaning. Its teaching is one of the richest mines of pure gold in the whole Bible."

When we follow the references to "purple" in a good concordance, the number of times it is mentioned in relation to the Tabernacle and with the Temple at Jerusalem would, I suggest, leave us in no doubt that the colours used in these structures were intimately connected with God and with the worship of God. I conclude, therefore, that "purple" is associated with divine matters.

I wish now to move onto a different association with the colour "purple", which is illustrated in the book of Esther. In Esther 1:5-6 we read: *"And when these days were completed, the king made a feast lasting seven days for all the people who were present in Shushan the citadel, from great to small, in the court of the garden of the king's palace. There were white and blue linen curtains fastened with chords of fine linen and purple on silver rods and marble pillars; and the couches were of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of alabaster, turquoise, and white and black marble."*

Notice that “purple” is linked with the royal residence in this Scripture. Another example from Esther 8:15, will reinforce this link with royalty: *“So Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue and white, with a crown of gold and a garment of fine linen and purple; and the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad.”*

The context for Esther 8:15 is Mordecai’s promotion by King Ahasuerus because he had foiled a plot to assassinate the king. Another similar example of a pagan king wearing purple is in Judges 8:26, where it states that *“... purple robes were on the kings of Midian.”*

What was true of royalty from the nations surrounding Israel was also true of Israel, as we learn from Song of Solomon 3:9-10: *“Of the wood of Lebanon Solomon the king made himself a palanquin: he made its pillars of silver, its supports of gold, its seat of purple, its interior paved with love by the daughters of Jerusalem.”*

Again, it is obvious that “purple” was a colour deliberately chosen and worthy of such transport for the king. Can I digress for a moment, however, by pointing out the precious thought that the interior of this covered chair was *“paved [or inlaid] with love”* or *“lovingly inlaid”* as it is translated in the New International Version? How good it would be if our work for the Lord could always be said to be done in love for Him.

Though I have spent some time quoting various Scriptures to show that the colour “purple” had connotations with royalty, I am now venturing into secular history to point out that the rulers of ancient Rome and Egypt also considered purple to be the colour associated with the elite of those nations. In 16th century, Elizabethan England, the colour purple was exclusively reserved for royalty. It might not be widely known that, even in modern times, in our democratic society, there was a shade of purple exclusive to the Queen’s cars at Rolls-Royce, when they were manufactured in Crewe. No other owner, however rich or influential, was allowed to use the colour known as royal claret.

Some of you might be wondering why I have spent so long on linking the colour “purple” to royalty, so we come now to the major section of our talk today, where we consider the Lord Jesus when He was dressed in purple. Having concentrated at some length that anyone wearing purple occupied a place of honour, it might be expected that we could concentrate our attention on the Lord as King, reigning in triumph over the world. Sadly, this is not how Scripture records the Lord wearing purple, as we shall see when I read some verses from Mark’s Gospel, but, before I do so, I want to remind anyone who has just joined us that you are listening to a broadcast from *Truth for Today*, where we are considering the colour “purple” in the Bible.

Now for Mark 15:15-20: *“So Pilate, wanting to gratify the crowd, released Barabbas to them; and he delivered Jesus, after he had scourged Him, to be crucified. Then the soldiers led Him away into the hall called Praetorium, and they called together the whole garrison. And they clothed Him with purple; and they twisted a crown of thorns, put it on His head, and began to salute Him, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’ Then they struck Him on the head with a reed and spat on Him; and bowing the knee, worshipped Him. And when they had mocked Him, they took the purple off Him, put His own clothes on Him, and led Him out to crucify Him.”*

It has been suggested, with a great deal of probability, that the verses we have read, Mark 15:15-20, picture what was known as the Game of the King. Roman soldiers, akin to modern soldiers, played games or other recreational activities. Some of the Roman games involved drinking, feasting, debauchery and cruelty. The Game of the King, played with a condemned prisoner, was well known in the east and so would be familiar to the soldiers of Pilate’s guard. It involved a condemned man moving from “station” to “station” on the throw of a dice. Needless to say, on occasions it would be carried out with fervour and frenzy.

On the pavement of the fortress of Antonia, in Jerusalem, are several carvings or engravings of lines, circles and symbols of various kinds. It is difficult to grasp the significance of each symbol, but some things are clear. As previously stated, the throw of a dice determined the progress of the prisoner around the “board”, with the progress being accelerated, or halted, depending on the symbols or circles reached in the journey. Whatever the rate of progress, the ending was always the same; the prisoner was brutally executed. Place the words I read from Mark 15:15-20 in the context of the Game of the King and one can begin to see the sufferings of the Lord as He was mocked and ridiculed, in addition to being knocked about by the callous and uncaring Roman legionnaires.

This game was not played by a few soldiers for the Scripture stated that *“... they called together the whole garrison”*, (Mark 15:16) meaning around five hundred men crowded around the Lord. We come now to the dressing of Jesus in a purple robe, which they would consider hilarious, as the prisoner shuffled around the hall with a crown of thorns upon his brow. Dressed in the colour so closely associated with royalty and privilege, yet with the helpless, hapless prisoner heading for execution was the soldiers’ idea of entertainment, as they saluted Him with the mocking shout of *“Hail, king of the Jews”* (Mark 15:18). When we know that the prisoner that day was our Lord, who we believe is the Son of God, the patience, grace and love that He showed in the hall of derision is amazing. The truth is, of course, He was a king, *“born King of the Jews”* (see Matthew 2:2). During His three years of public ministry His fame was spread abroad. The common people had received Him gladly, yet their leaders delivered Him up for envy to the Romans. His

condemnation at the hands of Pilate was clinched by the cry of: *"We have no king but Caesar"* (see John 19:15). Could it be all these indignities and cruelty, that He suffered, are in fact stages in the terrible "Game of the King", so well known in the Roman world?

Whether this be so or not, the essential truth that the Lord Jesus was brought as a *"lamb to the slaughter"* (see Isaiah 53:7) for our sakes is not altered. In grace He allowed Himself to be humiliated and mocked. Truly, the Man who could call legions of angels to His assistance (see Matthew 26:53) displayed, amidst the sound and furious violence of the Roman military men, a grace and meekness that was amazing. We all know that the savage scenes in the Praetorium were followed by the journey to Calvary, where the Lord endured further pain and humiliation when He was crucified. Yet there was suffering beyond even the physical pain, as Paul informed the Corinthian church in 2 Corinthians 5:20-21: *"Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."*

A well-known hymn tells us that

*"...none of the ransomed can ever know
how deep were the waters crossed
nor how dark the night passed through"*

Elizabeth C Clephane (1830-1869)

by the Lord Jesus in His sufferings on Calvary. The mystery at the centre of the phrase *"...He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us"* (2 Corinthians 5:21) can never be penetrated by the heart or mind of any created being. For Paul, however, the important message to each one of us is that we should be reconciled to God through the redeeming work of the Lord Jesus on the cross. My question to us all, at this time, is "Have we been reconciled? Are we believers in the Lord Jesus?"

Before we leave this section, I want to visit again the picture depicted in Mark's Gospel of Jesus wearing a purple robe and other symbols of undisguised mockery. The time is coming when the Lord will wear the garments of honour which all of creation will acknowledge.

The verse of a hymn:

*"Royal robes shall soon invest Thee,
Royal splendours crown Thy brow;
Christ of God, our souls confess Thee
King and Sovereign even now;
Thee we reverence, Thee obey,
Own Thee Lord and Christ alway."*

Richard Holden (1828-1886)

Let each one of us who have faith in the Lord Jesus show our faith by true allegiance to Him, by following His example, as the Apostle Peter wrote in 1 Peter 2:21-23, *"For to [suffering] you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously:"*

He, who wore purple in mockery, has set us an example of patient godliness, meaning we should seek to follow His example.

There are just three other passages of Scripture that I will cite before we finish our time together. The first of these can be found in Acts 16:13-14: *"And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met there. Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshipped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul."*

As a dealer and merchant in purple and other expensive materials, we can safely assume that Lydia was quite well-to-do, yet she resorted to the place of prayer. Wealth had not robbed her of her desire to commune with God. I pray that none of us will ever reach the point when we are too rich to seek the truth of the living God, as revealed by the Lord Jesus. Notice also that the Lord opened her heart to receive the things of God as ministered by Paul. If we had read Acts 16:15 we would have learned that Lydia was baptised into the Christian faith to become a disciple, unlike the rich young ruler of Luke 18:18-23, who refused to follow Jesus because he had great riches. Not only was Lydia baptised,

she also gave Paul and his companions lodgings in her home (Acts 16:15). What would the flogging and imprisonment of Paul, in Philippi (see Acts 16:20-24), do to her reputation? She was not ashamed to associate herself with Paul after he came out of prison, as Acts 16:40 tells us. No doubt mockery and insults would number among the rebukes she received for harbouring supposed criminals.

I don't suppose that many of us listening today would number amongst the noble and great personages of our society. I can certainly say that I don't, but it wouldn't make any difference to the Lord if we did. He came *"to call sinners to repentance"* (see Matthew 9:13, Mark 2:17, Luke 5:32). When, through grace, we become believers in the Lord Jesus on the basis of His righteousness, we ought to be willing disciples, as was Lydia, the seller of purple. Let us also practise hospitality, even if we do not have the riches of Lydia.

Finally, my last Scripture is from Revelation 17:4: *"The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication."*

From this we learn that the precious things, including purple, that were once the province of the noble and exclusive to royalty, are now the belongings of the prostitute. Whatever the final interpretation of the Revelation, it would seem that immorality was now acceptable, even dominant.

I finish with Revelation 18:11-12, *"And the merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her, for no one buys their merchandise anymore: merchandise of gold and silver, precious stones and pearls, fine linen and purple, silk and scarlet, every kind of citron wood, every kind of object of ivory, every kind of object of most precious wood, bronze, iron, and marble."*

Now purple is amongst the list of goods that once commanded a high price, but now have no value. The economy had taken such a fall that nothing is selling. Such words are a warning to us, as the message of Haggai was to the Israelites when he warned about putting wages into bags with holes (see Haggai 1:6). The Lord told His disciples, in Matthew 6:19-21, not to lay up treasure on earth where moth and rust can destroy or thieves break in and rob. Far better to lay up treasures in heaven where moths and rust cannot venture or where thieves can never break in.

Romans 14:17-19 advises us that: *"...the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men. Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another."*

Such thoughts are far from the words of a once popular song which I have paraphrased:

*"Eat all, drink all, pay nothing,
If thou does ought for nought,
Do it for thy self."*

Anon

Such selfishness and materialism is far from the example that the Lord has left us.

I think that the teaching from Revelation 18:11-12 is quite apparent, for they suggest that the values of man's world can change. Even fashion can determine value as any dealer in antiques can vouch. Peter, in his first letter, tells us that we are not redeemed with corruptible things such as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ (see 1 Peter 1:18-19). Sadly, we dwell in a world that generally does not count the death of Christ as anything special. I trust, however, that all of us listening to this broadcast count the things of Christ as precious. Purple robes or something similar might clothe the mighty today. We need to be clothed in the garments of salvation which only God can supply.

Good morning and thank you for listening.

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