

## The Robe

A Short Story about the Life of the Christian on Earth

### 1. Born and Born

Boywun and Boytoo were twin brothers, born together on a Friday afternoon. It was not an easy labor and delivery, and their mother was exhausted when she first heard them cry. She felt little better the next day; but despite her weariness and pain, she still summoned the strength to say to the family gathered, “Summon the tailor. Tomorrow we will wrap them in the robes.”

Those around smiled kindly at her request; she was, after all, very tired and obviously not aware of what she was saying. “It’s been a difficult couple of days,” cousin Choyce said soothingly. Gently adding, “It’s not time for the robes yet.”

“It is past time,” she said, her voice strained but firm. “Tomorrow we put them in the robes. They need the robes in to be clothed and warm and protected.” Her eyes fluttered, then closed.

Choyce murmured to another, “But that will do not good. These are tiny babies, just born. They don’t realize the significance of the robe. They don’t understand how it can help them. This should wait until they are old enough to put the robes on themselves—when they know what they are doing. Before that, it’s all rather foolish, isn’t it?”

The mother’s eyes coaxed open once more, and their spark added to the uncompromising tone of her words. “Do my children need to understand a coat before it can keep them warm? Should I wait to give them milk until they can understand its nutritional value? Should we postpone their breathing until they can diagram oxygen? No! These things are beneficial—and necessary!—now, long before they understand.” Drawing another breath, she spoke with authority to the familiar strangers gathered around. “Call the tailor. Tomorrow we put the robes upon my children.”

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Boywun and Boytoo squalled in the tailor’s presence the following morning, eliciting a few chuckles from the gathering and a tired smile from their mother. The tailor fitted the robes with a bit of water as he spoke the Name. Upon the mother’s instruction, he announced the twins to be James and John, robed and known to the Father.

The service continued. The twins nodded off. Choyce frowned. Uncle Skeptic shrugged.

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“Thank you for joining us today,” said the tailor. “You enjoyed the service?”

“Truth is, sir,” drawled Uncle Skeptic, “I don’t know what the big deal is. I hear all this fancy talk about robes and life; all I see are two kids who finally, thankfully, fell asleep. I heard words and I saw water, but I still don’t see no robes.”

“These are not robes to see with the eyes,” said the tailor. “We know the robes are there because He promises that they are. I cannot see them, either, but I trust that the Father is true to His Word. James and John wear robes because He says so.”

Uncle Skeptic shrugged again and walked down the steps, so the tailor turned his attention to the drowsy duo in the pram. “My, my,” he whispered. “What a first three days you two have had. You were born, and now you’ve already died since. But now, though you die, you live.” He crisscrossed each forehead one more time and whispered, “Go in peace.”

1. What is the robe, and how is it put on? (Isaiah 61:10; Galatians 3:27)
2. Why doesn't a baby have to understand Holy Baptism for it to be effective? (Titus 3:4-5)
3. Is Baptism necessary for an infant? (Ps. 51:5)
4. Who is the tailor and what is his job? Or, who are the tailors, and what is their job? (Eph. 4:11-12; I Cor. 4:1)
5. The tailor whispers, "Go in peace." What is this peace? (Rom. 5:1,10) What prevents us from having it? (Rom. 3:10-12) Why can we have it? (Rom. 5:6) How do we receive it? (Acts 2:38-39)
6. The tailor also says, "What a first three days you two have had. You were born, and now you've already died since. But now, though you die, you live." What does he mean? What does the robe do? (Rom. 6:3-4; Gal. 2:20)

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## 2. Childhood

Once a week, for as long as they could remember, their mother took James and John to see the tailor. It was a strange sort of trip. After a week of being children, the boys' robes were not particularly clean; there was a stain here and a rip there, the belt loosened and the fit disarrayed. But their mother did not take time to clean them up first; on the eighth day of the week, very early in the morning, she took them—no matter how dirty—to hear the tailor.

The tailor sowed with words. He spoke to them. He told them about the One who had given them their robes. He told them how the Robe-Giver had died so that they could live forever, and that He had risen again. He told them about how important it was for them to keep their robes on. If they did, they would live forever. If they took them off or left them behind, they would surely die. It was important, the twins realized, to keep their robes in good condition, lest they be lost; but somehow, without their realizing, the robes became dirty and scuffed each week. One day, when they were seven years old, they mentioned this to the tailor.

"Mr. Tailor," they said, "we are afraid that if we keep getting our robes dirty or torn, that they will eventually wear out and we will be lost. What then? Can we get another robe?"

"No," said the tailor. "There is only one."

"But how can it be mended? How can it be cleaned? How can we be sure that it does not wear out, when we can't even see it?" they asked him.

"Remember what I have told you many, many times. The One who made your robes has also taken away the rips and the tears and the spots and the stains," explained the tailor.

"He has?" they asked.

"Hasn't He?" quizzed the tailor gently. "What does His Word say? Hasn't He promised this to be true?"

"Yes, He has," agreed the puzzled pair.

"Then go in peace," said the tailor, a smile on his face.

The boys left with their mother. Squinting in the bright light outside, they said, "Why did the tailor smile?"

Their mother was smiling, too. “If you could see your robes, you would know,” she said. “The stains and tears are gone. The rips are not mended, but vanished. Your robes are bright, blood white. It’s as if they’re brand new, as if the damage had never been.”

“Mother!” they cried. “Our robes are as clean and new as the day we first wore them? But why now? Will this happen every seven years?”

Their mother laughed. “No, dear children. It has been happening with every visit to the tailor as he has told you about the Robe-Giver. You just have not noticed until now.”

“That’s a miracle,” said John in a rare moment of childhood insight.

“Yes, it is,” replied his mother, her eyes now serious. She knelt down, gathering her sons to her. “And let me tell you of another. You have grown much since I gave birth to you. But know this: The robes still fit as if they were put on you today.” She stared at them until their attention was fully riveted upon her alone. “Always remember that this robe is enough to cover you, no matter how big you grow or how old you become. Always remember the robe that the Robe-Giver has given you.”

Startled by the thought that her children were growing fast, she stood and took each one by the hand. They walked home, the mother at once comforted and anxious.

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1. Sometimes, we say that the Christian is supposed to live in his Baptism. Based upon the story, what does this mean?
2. What causes our “robe” to appear torn and stained? (Is. 1:18)
3. How is our “robe” restored? (Rom. 10:17; Heb. 4:12; 2 Sam. 12:13; I Jn. 1:9)
4. The twins were forgiven for sins they didn’t even realize they had committed. As adults, do we have to confess every sin to be forgiven? (Ps. 19:12)
5. Why, do you suppose, was the mother comforted at the end of the day? Why was she anxious?

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### **3. Into the World**

Children cannot remain children forever—at least not in this kingdom, and it was only a matter of time until the men James and John left their mother and went out into the world. “Go in peace,” she said. “Remember that you are always welcome in this house. But more than that, remember the robe that you wear. Find the local tailor and hear him often.” The twins set off, unseen garments snow-white in the morning sun.

James and John settled in the same town, and both became rather successful over time. James became the owner of a grocery store, while John worked for a large corporation as a computer programmer. They worked hard through the week, but left the eighth day of the week open. They found a tailor who spoke of the Robe-Giver, and they gladly listened as His Word mended their robes to newness and perfection. Now that they were older, the tailor introduced something new: new to them, at least, although their mother had partaken often. “Now that you know and confess who the Robe-Giver is, He has prepared for you an additional gift.” With that, the tailor gave them special food, bread and wine divinely-fortified. “Along with the Robe-Giver’s restoring Word,” he said, “this too will keep you well-clothed.”

It was not too much later that James met a girl with whom he fell in love. John was quite convinced that he would have a sister-in-law soon; she and James got along famously. The only drawback seemed to be that she didn’t like what the tailor had to say. “If you want a satisfying life,” she said, “Then go and help those

around you. That's what it's all about." James began skipping meetings with the tailor. Instead, he and the girl spent their first day of the week helping the poor and cleaning up neighborhoods. They organized soup kitchens and arranged for groceries to be delivered to the elderly. He and the girl did much good, and were even named citizens of the year by the local mayor. Even John was impressed by their work. Still, there was something that troubled him, so he pulled his brother aside.

"Dear brother," he said, "I do not mean to offend you, because you are doing so much good. Indeed, I wish that more people would do what you are doing. But I fear that your robe is in bad shape. It must, by now, have all sorts of spots and stains and tears; it could well be unraveling or dragging behind you. I am concerned. You are doing much good, but if you lose your robe, then you are lost."

"What do you mean?" objected James. "Should I stop doing the things that I am doing? Is it wrong to help other people?"

"Not at all! We should all do such work in love for our neighbor!" John responded. "But while these things are good, they can't take the place of what the tailor tells us. Come with me this week and hear the Robe-Giver's Word." James returned with John to the tailor that week. He listened, confessed and partook of the meal. When he stepped back into the sunlight, his robe was clean and new. "Now I see," he said to John. "It is good to help others, but only the Robe-Giver can keep my robe clean and new."

James went and told his beloved of his discovery, but she would have nothing of it. She soon stopped returning his calls and eventually left him a note that she didn't want to see him again. James was broken-hearted, to be sure; but it was far more important that he wear the robe and keep it clean. Besides, it was not an either-or; it was not a matter of keeping the robe or finding a wife. The answer, he wisely reasoned, was to find a wife who also wore the robe.

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1. Why does the mother instruct her children to find the local tailor, and what does this mean for us? (Ex. 20:8) Why is this so important for us? (Is. 55:10-11; Rom 10:17)
2. What is the special meal that the tailor gives them? (I Cor. 11:23-26) What does it give us?
3. Is it wrong to do good works and care for others? (Eph. 2:10; Gal. 5:13) What was the mistake that James and the woman made? (Eph. 2:8,9) What is the solution? (Ps. 51:10-12)
4. What does God have to say about marrying someone of a different faith? (2 Cor. 6:14) Why? (cf. I Kings 11:1-10)

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#### **4. Unto the World**

Shortly after this, John was transferred to another city. It was not much later that he met a woman with whom he fell deeply in love. Her name was Rose, and she also wore the robe. On top of that, she was attractive, witty and smart. They found themselves spending great amounts of time together. They found themselves making plans for the future.

When it happened, it took them both by surprise, for the progression seemed so natural and good: From holding hands to a little kiss, from a little kiss to a longer kiss, from a longer kiss to wandering hands, from wandering hands to a night together. John gave up his virginity long before his wedding day.

As the next day dawned, John perceived a large rent in his robe—right across his heart. It gapped with every step he took, and his conscience screamed of an ugly scarlet stain to mark its presence even more. "What have we done?" he cried out, and his lover felt the same. The tailor had warned them of such

temptations, and they hadn't fallen right away. But they had fallen all the same. "What do we do?" asked Rose.

John considered, then said slowly, "Let us go to the tailor right away. What we have done is wrong, and that will be a problem between us. But worse than that, our robes!" She, too, perceived a rent and a spreading blemish. "I do not relish telling the tailor, but we need our robes mended. Let us go and have our garments restored right away, so that we might have the Robe-Giver's grace in dealing with what we have done."

"I cannot do that yet," said Rose. "You go. I cannot."

John stumbled to the tailor's, horrified and sure that the scarlet stain was spreading. No one on the street seemed to notice or care, but to him it was obvious and accusing. Though it was far from the beginning of the week, the tailor welcomed him in. Privately, John confessed what had happened. The tailor listened thoughtfully, but showed no shock. When John finished, silence ensued. Then the tailor spoke. "John, you know that you have sinned. Now, tell me: What is that stain across your heart?"

"It is the sin that I have committed," said John. "It is the guilt I have, because I have broken the sixth commandment."

"That is right," confirmed the tailor. "And what is the crimson rip in the midst of that blemish?"

"Why, it is the guilt that I *feel*," wailed John. "It crushes me. With every step, it rends all the more and threatens to destroy the robe completely!" He began to weep, his body shaking. The robe showed no sign of repair.

"John," said the tailor in an earnest voice, "Listen to me. What you have done is wrong, as you have confessed. But know this: You have been clothed from your infancy with a robe that the Robe-Giver died to give you. He has died for this sin, too. He has taken your guilt upon Himself. You are forgiven and the stain is gone. You are free."

"As for the rip that you feel, which destroys the robe, listen carefully: As long as you wear that robe, the evil one cannot abduct you. This is his plot: He tempts you with sin and he afflicts you with guilt when you fall. He makes you think that by your sin you have torn and shredded the robe—that it lies in tatters and needs to be cast off. But this is his deception. A rip is a nothing, not a something, and a nothing can do no harm. Such sins do not destroy the robe: It fully covers you unless, in your guilt, you cast it off. And *that* is the evil one's ploy (serpent that he is!): To make you abandon the robe and any hope you might have. But hear the Robe-Giver's promise, and know that your robe is intact this day. Go in peace."

With tears, John humbly thanked the tailor and stepped outside, relieved that his robe was once again pure and new. He began the search for Rose, but with alarm he ran back to the tailor. "Dear tailor," he said, "I thought my robe was clean. But with each step, I know that the stain spreads again—and I can nearly hear the tearing of the fabric! I thought I was forgiven. Am I not?"

"Truly I say to you," said the tailor, "you are. That stain of sin returns, but it is not the same sin. It is not there because the Robe-Giver has not forgiven you, but because you doubt that He has. For the rest of your days, the evil one will use this sin to try to make you doubt the Robe-Giver's love and grace. Do not give in to this temptation of distrust. Instead, whenever the guilt preys upon you, use it as a reminder of your sinfulness and your need for forgiveness. Use it to recognize the priceless worth of the robe that you wear. And confess your doubt in the Robe-Giver's love, and He in love will forgive you."

Relieved, John left, the stain gone once again. Whenever it returned, he confessed his guilt and his doubt. And although he still felt it, it was taken away from him.

John hastened to find Rose and to tell her the Good News that she too could be forgiven and made innocent once more. But he did not find her. Instead, a note lay crumpled on a tabletop. The note read:

Dear John,

I must go. Every time I look at this robe, the stain of our sin has grown. I cannot bear to look at it anymore, because it suffocates me every time I do. For now, I've packed it in a bag and will search for something else to wear; I need to do this because the robe shames me, and I feel it tearing and tattering even more as I pack it away. Grass withers, flowers fade. I'm sorry.

Rose

The note was a sobering one for John, and he saw the peril Rose was in. Perhaps she would remember the Robe-Giver's grace, confess her sin and wear her whitened robe again. If she found some other garment, it might indeed distract her from her sin and guilt, but it would not take it away; and the longer she kept her robe packed away and ignored, the more likely she'd one day just throw it away with a hardened heart.

John would always pray for Rose, but he never saw her again.

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1. What does God have to say about sexual immorality? Is it dangerous? (I Cor. 6:9-10, 18-20) What is the real danger? (Ps. 51:4) Is it forgivable? (2 Sam. 12:13)

2. When we feel as if God cannot forgive us, what should we do? Wait until we feel forgivable? (I Jn. 1:9) Hint: What has God said about your sins? (Rom. 3:22-24; Rom. 8:38-39; I Jn. 1:7)

3. If you have confessed a sin, but the guilt remains, what does this mean? What should you do? (I Cor. 15:9-10; 2 Cor. 12:7-10)

4. Martin Luther once said, "When I urge you to go to confession, I am simply urging you to be a Christian." (*Large Catechism*, Brief Exhortation 32) What does he mean?

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## 5. In the World

Years went by and, as happens so often, the brothers lost touch with one another. John eventually married and had a family, all of whom wore the robe. They provided him with many joys, but he had his share of struggles, too. The software market went soft, and he was laid off for a while. Money was short, and worry-lines etched his face. A co-worker who had also lost his job pointed out one day, "Fat lot of good that robe is doing you now. Why in the world do you keep on wearing it?"

Short on sleep and anxious for his family, John's answer still carried confidence: "This trial doesn't teach me to hate the Robe-Giver and take off the robe. It reminds me exactly of why in the world I keep on wearing it. You see, the things of this world come and go, and I can't rely on them. But the One who gave me this robe will not fail me; He will certainly provide for our needs. The poverty we have now only demonstrates the beggary of this world. But the robe I wear declares that the treasures of heaven are mine."

John eventually got his job back, but it wasn't the end of his struggles. It began as a twitch in his arm one day, and on another his knees wouldn't work. The doctors determined that it was multiple sclerosis, and that John would need at least a cane for the rest of his life. "John," said his friend, "this robe you cling to isn't helping; it surely hasn't kept you from getting sick. Why in God's name do you still wear it?"

His facial muscles didn't always work best, but John got the answer out. "The robe is no guarantee against sickness in this life. I cannot hold it responsible to do things that the Robe-Giver didn't promise it would do. But, because I wear the robe, the Robe-Giver will raise me from the dead with a perfect body, and I will never be sick again. How do I know that He loves me? I have proof: I am wearing it. The robe declares that He has made me His child. And so I wear it in God's name."

His friend remained skeptical, but eventually agreed to go with John's family and listen to the tailor. Although he was far into his adult years, he believed what the tailor told him about the Robe-Giver. One day after further instruction, a newborn's robe was placed upon him. It fit perfectly. "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy Word," he sang.

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1. When has God promised that we will no longer suffer from sickness, injury and disability? (I Cor. 15:52b-57) If we are told that our current sufferings are proof that God doesn't keep His promises, what should be our response? (I Cor. 15:58)
2. What does God have to say about treasures? (Matt. 6:19-21) Give examples of the two kinds He talks about.
3. Given the story of John and his co-worker, what is another reason for studying the Bible and knowing it well? (I Pet. 3:15)
4. Sometimes we compare Baptism to adoption. Why? (Gal. 3:26-27; Titus 3:5-8)

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## 6. Not of this World

The e-mail arrived one day, short and unwelcome:

John: The end is near. Please come. James
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The twins had not spoken to one another for years, each consumed with his own matters. It took some doing with his uncooperative body, but John immediately went to find his brother. He found James on his deathbed, and in even worse trouble than that.

Panting through parched lips, James described the past many years since they had spoken. His store had become a successful chain, but it had become a seven-day-a-week job to keep it going. He had been married, but his wife had left him. He barely ever saw his children. To cope, he buried himself in his work even more, building new stores and giving money to many worthy causes. He had re-married, and begun to feel happy once again. But none of it stopped the pain when it started; none of it could change the news when the doctor told him his days were numbered.

"This is my last day," said James, "and I'm glad I could see you again."

"As am I, dear brother," said John. "But please tell me, what of your robe? I do not hear you speak of it. Did you cast it off somewhere along the way?"

James raised a bony hand clenched into a fist, striking a puny blow to his own chest. Tearfully, he said, "I never meant to. I was just so busy with other things that I didn't have time for the mending and restoration. I didn't have time to hear the tailor. One day, I found I'd worn it out, bit by bit. I did not mean to leave it behind; I just slowly wore it away simply because I failed to let the Robe-Giver restore it." His fist opened, as if revealing a clenched treasure. "Sometimes I feel like I still have a thread left; but though I keep it, I do not wear it, and it grows shorter all the time. It is surely not enough to clothe me." He shook his head, his voice cracking. "And now, it is the only thing I really need, and I have left it far behind. There is no time even to call the tailor, for my death is very near."

Indeed, there was no time to call the tailor. Earnestly, John spoke. "My brother, by business or by busyness you have neglected your robe and left it far behind. But the Robe-Giver lives to give robes, and He is not put off easily. He is here even now to clothe you once more."

“But how can that be,” moaned James. “Long ago, our childhood tailor said there is only one robe for each of us. How can the Robe-Giver clothe me once more?”

John was taken aback for a moment, but then knew the truth to tell. “Brother James,” he said, “If the robe is truly and completely gone for you, then this would not trouble you so. Has the Robe-Giver died for your sins?”

“Yes...yes,” faltered James. “And I had my chance. But I no longer feel that He has died for me.”

“But doesn’t His Word promise that He has, even if you do not feel it?” continued John.

“Yes, He has promised,” said James, his eyes tightly closed.

“So, is it true?” persisted John. “The Robe-Giver has taken away even your sin? Even now? Even if you do not feel it?”

“Yes, His promise is more certain than my feelings,” whispered James. His voice strengthened, a great comfort realized. “His promise is greater than all my sins.” His eyes remained closed, but his taut body relaxed for the first time since John had arrived.

John started at what he heard. “James! Look! By your own lips, you do not hold a thread in your hand; you wear the robe. It is pure and white and absolutely without stain or spot or blemish! James, open your eyes! Look!”

James did not open his eyes, but his final breath sounded curiously as if he said, “I...see.”

Amid tears of both joy and sorrow, his brother whispered, “Go in peace.”

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1. What does God say about falling in love with the things of this world? Can they help us in the end? (Eccl. 5:10-16)

2. Instead of openly rejecting the Gospel, what is another way of losing the faith? (Matt. 13:22) What should we do instead? (I Tim. 6:17) What does this verse mean?

3. What is the great news of 2 Tim. 2:13? Why is this such a comfort in James’ case?

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And finally:

1. What does Baptism have to do with daily life? Or is it something that just happened long ago?

2. Sometimes, a pastor is asked a question like this: “Let’s say that a Christian is driving on a mountain pass. His car goes out of control and flies over the cliff. Just before he hits, he swears and breaks the second commandment. He doesn’t have time to confess the sin. Can he still be saved?” With Baptism in mind, how would you answer?

3. In Revelation 7, the great multitude of heaven is described as clothed in white robes. Why are the robes clean (Rev. 7:14)? Who has done this work? (7:10) What are the gifts that come with it? (7:15-17)