

# Sackcloth

## A Symbol of Humility

- Introduction
  - Sackcloth is often thought of as burlap since that is what is commonly used for sack-making today, but the sackcloth of the Bible was made of goat or camel hair and was typically dark in color [Rev 6:12].
  - Our English word “sack” is a transliteration of the Hebrew word **סַק** (saq) which can mean either the sack or the material it is made of.
  - There are two views of the shape of the garments made of sackcloth.
    - The garments were similar to grain sacks [Gen 42:25-27], rectangular in shape, sewn on the sides and top, with openings for the arms and head.
    - The garments resembled a loincloth and were worn around the waist [Gen 37:34; 2 Sam 3:31; 1 Kgs 20:31; Isa 15:3; Jer 48:37].
  - Sackcloth is somewhat coarse and probably uncomfortable when worn next to the skin.
  - Clothing made of sackcloth was inexpensive and provided covering for people of limited means, but apparently too low in quality to be worn in the king’s presence [Esth 4:2].
  - The material itself was also used for making tents, sails, carpets and even bedding.
- Sackcloth in the Scriptures
  - Donning sackcloth is often associated with mourning [Gen 37:33-34; 2 Sam 3:31-32].
  - The wearing of sackcloth was a response to personal [Job 16:12-15] as well as national distress [Isa 36:13-37:1].
  - This was often accompanied by special prayers to God asking for deliverance [Isa 37:2-20; Dan 9:3-19].
  - Sackcloth would also be worn by those who were repentant of their sins [Neh 9:1; Jonah 3:5; Matt 11:21; 1 Kgs 21:20-27].
  - This was supposed to be an outward display of an inner humility [1 Kgs 21:29].
  - Sackcloth was worn by kings [2 Kgs 6:30], priests [Joel 1:13], elders [Lam 2:10], prophets [Isa 20:2] and even livestock [Jonah 3:8].
  - The two witnesses will wear sackcloth [Rev 11:3].
  - The wearing of sackcloth for mourning and penitence was not limited to Israel...
    - Aram [1 Kgs 20:31-32]
    - Moab [Isa 15:3]
    - Ammon [Jer 49:3]
    - Tyre [Ezek 27:31]
    - Ninevah [Jonah 3:5]

- Wearing sackcloth was often accompanied by the putting on of ashes [Esth 4:1] although often they would lay in a bed of ashes [Esth 4:3; Jer 6:26; Jonah 3:6; Luke 10:13].
- Sometimes the head would be shaved and/or the beard cut short while wearing sackcloth [Isa 3:24; 22:12; Jer 48:37; Ezek 7:18; 27:31; Amos 8:10 cp. Lev 19:27].
- Before sackcloth was put on, the clothes were often torn [Gen 37:34; 2 Sam 3:31; 1 Kgs 21:27; 2 Kgs 19:1; Esth 4:1; Isa 37:1].
- When a lament was called for, sackcloth would often be worn [Jer 4:8; Joel 1:13; Amos 8:10].
- Donning sackcloth was often associated with fasting [Neh 9:1; Ps 35:13; Isa 58:5; Dan 9:3; Joel 1:13-14; Jonah 3:5].
- All of these practices had become so ritualistic by the time of Christ that He commanded believers to not make any changes to their appearance when fasting [Matt 6:16-18].
- This simple lesson highlights the heart attitude of humility that was supposed to be an integral part of the wearing of (or laying on) sackcloth [1 Chr 21:16].
- Conclusions
  - Sackcloth was an inexpensive material used to make clothing for people of limited means.
  - The practice of wearing sackcloth around the loins originated as an outward indication of an inner attitude of humility.
  - This humble attitude could be in response to many different circumstances – personal sin, personal loss, national disaster, etc.
  - Activities often associated with wearing sackcloth are repentance, mourning, lamentation, etc. all of which are superficial unless accompanied by a contrite heart.
  - Torn clothes, beds of ashes, shaved heads, etc. often coincide with the donning of sackcloth, but all of these are simply for show unless they reflect the true state of the soul.
  - While we no longer participate in these outward activities, the body of Christ is still given to fasting [Acts 13:2; 14:23].
  - Today we may have an outward response such as hanging our head, putting our head in our hands, tearing up, etc., but it is humility in the core of the soul which sackcloth represented that God desires and makes all the difference.