

Old Testament References to Wearing Sackcloth

Seeking God's help at a time of national danger:

- Daniel 9:2-3 Version (NIV)

In the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. **So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.**

- Esther 4:1-3 New International Version (NIV)

When **Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes**, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. ² But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. ³ In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

Calling others to seek God's help at a time of national danger:

- 2 Samuel 3:30-32 (NIV)

(Joab and his brother Abishai murdered Abner because he had killed their brother Asahel in the battle at Gibeon.) Then **David said to Joab and all the people with him, "Tear your clothes and put on sackcloth and walk in mourning in front of Abner."** King David himself walked behind the bier. They buried Abner in Hebron, and the king wept aloud at Abner's tomb. All the people wept also.

- 2 Kings 19:2

After Sennacherib threatened Jerusalem

When **King Hezekiah heard this, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and went into the temple of the LORD. He sent Eliakim the palace administrator, Shebna the secretary and the leading priests, all wearing sackcloth, to the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz.** They told him, "This is what Hezekiah says: This day is a day of distress and rebuke and disgrace, as when children come to the moment of birth and there is no strength to deliver them. It may be that the LORD your God will hear all the words of the field commander, whom his master, the king of Assyria, has sent to ridicule the living God, and that he will rebuke him for the words the LORD your God has heard. Therefore pray for the remnant that still survives."

- Isaiah 22:12

The Lord, the LORD Almighty, called you on that day to weep and to wail, to tear out your hair and put on sackcloth.

(Notice that call here is from the Lord , rather than priests)

Jeremiah 4:8

So put on sackcloth, lament and wail, for the fierce anger of the LORD has not turned away from us.

Jeremiah 6:26

Put on sackcloth, my people, and roll in ashes; mourn with bitter wailing as for an only son, for suddenly the destroyer will come upon us.

- Joel 1:13-15

[A Call to Lamentation](#)

Put on sackcloth, you priests, and mourn;
wail, you who minister before the altar.
Come, spend the night in sackcloth,
you who minister before my God;
for the grain offerings and drink offerings
are withheld from the house of your God.
Declare a holy fast;
call a sacred assembly.
Summon the elders
and all who live in the land
to the house of the LORD your God,
and cry out to the LORD.

- Jonah 3:5-10

The Ninevites believed God. **A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.**

When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh:

"By the decree of the king and his nobles:

Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on

God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

Expressing penitence:

- 1 Chronicles 21:16

David looked up and saw the angel of the LORD standing between heaven and earth, with a drawn sword in his hand extended over Jerusalem. **Then David and the elders, clothed in sackcloth, fell facedown.**

David said to God, “Was it not I who ordered the fighting men to be counted? I, the shepherd,^[c] have sinned and done wrong. These are but sheep. What have they done? LORD my God, let your hand fall on me and my family, but do not let this plague remain on your people.”

- Nehemiah 9:1-3 (NIV)

The Israelites Confess Their Sins

On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the **Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads.** Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the sins of their ancestors. They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshiping the LORD their God.

Humbling oneself for oneself, and on behalf of others:

- Job 16:15

“I have sewed sackcloth over my skin and buried my brow in the dust.

- Psalm 35:13

**Yet when they were ill, I put on sackcloth
and humbled myself with fasting.**

When my prayers returned to me unanswered,

I went about mourning
as though for my friend or brother.
I bowed my head in grief
as though weeping for my mother.

Mourning loss (of a child/ren):

Jacob:

- Genesis 37:33-35 (NIV)

He recognized it and said, "It is my son's robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces."

Then **Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days**. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. "No," he said, "I will continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave." So his father wept for him.

David:

- 2 Samuel 12:16

David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and spent the nights lying in **sackcloth** on the ground.

Rizpah:

- 2 Samuel 21:10

Rizpah daughter of Aiah took **sackcloth** and spread it out for herself on a rock. From the beginning of the harvest till the rain poured down from the heavens on the bodies, she did not let the birds touch them by day or the wild animals by night.

Pleading before the king for one's life:

Ben-Hadad, King of Aram:

- 1 Kings 20:30-32 New International Version (NIV)

The rest of them escaped to the city of Aphek, where the wall collapsed on twenty-seven thousand of them. And Ben-Hadad fled to the city and hid in an inner room. His officials said to him, "Look, we have heard that the kings of Israel are merciful. Let us go to the king of

Israel with sackcloth around our waists and ropes around our heads. Perhaps he will spare your life.” **Wearing sackcloth around their waists and ropes around their heads, they went to the king of Israel** and said, “Your servant Ben-Hadad says: ‘Please let me live.’” The king answered, “Is he still alive? He is my brother.”

Sackcloth as the outward expression of anguish:

- 1 Kings 21:27

When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, **put on sackcloth and fasted**. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly.

Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite: ²⁹ “Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself, I will not bring this disaster in his day, but I will bring it on his house in the days of his son.

With the Lord the inner heart always matters more than any outward practice:

- Isaiah 58:4-6 (NIV)

Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife,
and in striking each other with wicked fists.
You cannot fast as you do today
and expect your voice to be heard on high.
Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,
only a day for people to humble themselves?
Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed
and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?
Is that what you call a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?