

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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The significance of colours in the Bible: Scarlet (Red)

Today we continue our present series in which we are looking at the significance of colours in the Bible. There are six colours which we will be looking at and the order we shall follow is: blue, purple, scarlet, white, silver, and gold. If you have been listening, you will know that today's talk is talk number 3, and the subject is the colour scarlet. If you have missed the first two talks, or want to listen again, or download the transcripts for any of these talks, you can do this via our website.

It is estimated that 4½% of the UK's population are colour-blind. That's about 2.7 million people, most of whom are men. Men are on average 16 times more likely to be colour-blind than women. I am so thankful not to be colour-blind, and feel sorry for those who are. Colour is such a wonderful feature in our world and shows God's majesty in His creation. God's summation of His creation was that it was "very good"! (see Genesis 1:31). God didn't create in black and white, He designed a world of colour. Not only the strong and vivid contrasting colours but all the subtle shades, too, which enrich our lives. I guess we all have favourite colours and this can be reflected in the decoration of our homes or in the clothes we wear etc. Colour affects our lives in so many ways. In the sporting world, colours can divide cities; blue or green, red or blue, etc. Some people rally round political parties who often use colours to set themselves apart: blue, red, yellow, green etc.

Sometimes the choice of colours is purely to make things look good, but sometimes colours have immense importance. For example, a chef might carefully select foods of various colours to make the plate look good, which is nice, but it is vital to know the difference between red and green when crossing a road! It is interesting, too, how colours have come to convey meanings which are understood across much of the world. Traditionally, at a wedding, the bride wears white, but at a funeral, the mourners wear black. So colours certainly add a dimension to our lives. Would we therefore expect it to be any different with the colours and how they are used in the Scriptures?

You may have already heard the talk on blue and purple. No doubt the speakers would have talked about the heavenly colour (blue) and the imperial colour (purple). So today we consider colour number 3 - scarlet (or red). In passing it is interesting to see that while blue and red are primary colours, purple is a mixture of the two.

If you check a concordance, you will find that about half of the mentions of scarlet in the Scripture are in connection with the Tabernacle, which was the tent of meeting which Moses had built, following the pattern he was shown by God. This Tabernacle was the centre of the camp of Israel as they moved through the wilderness and into the promised land of Canaan. Starting in Exodus 25 we read, "*And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, that they bring me an offering: of every man that giveth it willingly with his heart ye shall take my offering. And this is the offering which ye shall take of them; gold, and silver, and brass, and blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine linen,...*", (Exodus 25:1-4) and throughout Exodus we get 26 mentions of scarlet in connection with the Tabernacle. So we will obviously need to have a closer look at the Tabernacle set up and the way scarlet was used, as instructed by God Himself.

However, generally when I am asked to talk about a biblical subject, I look for the first mention. I often feel that we can learn from the first mention of a thing in the Scriptures. So the first mention of scarlet in the Scriptures is in the book of Genesis (the book of the beginnings, sometimes called the seed plot of the Bible). In Genesis 38 we read of the shame of Judah, one of Jacob's (or Israel's) sons. It's not a good story but we can learn lessons from it. Tamar, who was Judah's daughter-in-law, disguised herself as a harlot and subsequently became pregnant with twins by Judah, her father-in-law. At the birth a scarlet thread was tied to the child whose hand came out first (see Genesis 38:28), although it was his brother who was actually born first. His name was Pharez (see Genesis 38:29) and we will come back to this later on our talk. What do we learn then from the use of the scarlet thread? Well, I have often heard that Scripture interprets Scripture and my mind goes to the very significant use of the scarlet thread in the story of Rahab.

I'm sure many listeners will know the story of Joshua and the battle of Jericho (see Joshua 6:1-27). The armies of God's people (the Israelites) surrounded the city of Jericho, marching round it once each day, for six days (Joshua 6:14). After marching round the city seven times on the seventh day the priests blew the trumpets and the walls fell down! (Joshua 6:15-21) You can read the story in Joshua 6. Now Rahab's house was on the walls of the

city, but her house did not fall down (see Joshua 6:22-25). Why was that? To get the answer we need to read Joshua 2:1-24 and the story of the spies who had escaped from the city with the help of Rahab. She had put her life in danger to save the Israeli spies, because she knew that God had given the land of Canaan to the Israelites. And so she was to be granted safety when the city was overthrown. As long as she put a scarlet thread (or line as it is later called) in the window, no destruction would come upon her and those took refuge in the house with her (see Joshua 2:18). Some see a connection with the colour scarlet (or red) and the salvation which is to be found in the blood of Jesus. Certainly there is scarlet mentioned in the law concerning the cleansing of the leper (see Leviticus 14), but I believe the emphasis there is on the blood of the clean bird which was slain. Remember, too, in the night of the Passover in Egypt the word of the LORD was, *“And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, ...”* (see Exodus 12:13). Certainly the blood was red and would have been a striking sight, but the importance is placed on the shed blood of the lamb.

I think the scarlet thread in the stories of both Tamar and Rahab is used because of its striking colour. Whenever I think of scarlet, I think of the Chelsea pensioners and the scarlet coats they wear on Remembrance Day. How striking they look! So I suggest the reason why scarlet was used on the two occasions considered was that it was so striking a colour that it could be seen easily. Just in the same way that the British Red Cross use red on white so that their movements can be easily seen, especially on the battlefield. What is truly remarkable, and it would be remiss of me not to mention it, is that both of these women are in the genealogy of the Lord Jesus Christ. Careful study of Matthew 1:3 and Matthew 1:5 will conclude that although the names are spelt slightly differently, they are the same women as we have been considering. What wonderful grace that in the Gospel which highlights the Messiah Christ as the true King of Israel, these two women should be part of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham (see Matthew 1:1-17).

The prophet Isaiah uses another word alongside scarlet to describe this most tremendous colour. I want to spend a few minutes today looking at what he (the evangelist of the Old Testament) says about scarlet or crimson. Let's read together Isaiah 1:18, *“Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”* Isaiah says that our sins are *“as scarlet”* and *“red like crimson.”* I know this is not a popular message in our western society where the very notion of sin is being challenged, but it was not a popular message in Isaiah's time either. Although the Bible doesn't record his death, some think his martyrdom is alluded to in Hebrews 11:37 where we read, *“they were sawn asunder, ...”* The Apostle Paul writes to Timothy, just before he was martyred and says, *“Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution”* (see 2 Timothy 3:12). Timothy was warned that *“perilous times”* (2 Timothy 3:1) were to come, and if we read the words of the aged Apostle Paul, we can see that the things he warns about are with us now. Surely there is a very great need today for men and women of God to *“preach the word”* (2 Timothy 4:2) just like Isaiah did in his day. God remains disposed to bless mankind, but only on the basis that sins are dealt with righteously.

It should be noted that the Gospel begins with the *“righteousness of God”* (see Romans 1:17) before His love and grace can be known. In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul clearly and carefully sets out the teaching of the Gospel, that is, God's *“good news”*. Read the early chapters and you will see that before God can reveal His love, He must declare His righteousness. There can be no blessing for mankind until he or she acknowledges before God, that they are sinners. But God's good news is that there is a fount where sins are washed away! How can this be? What can make sins, deep dyed like scarlet and crimson, be white as snow and wool (see Isaiah 1:18). The hymn writer asks the question and gives the answer,

*What can wash away my stain?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
What can make me whole again?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.*

*Oh, precious is the flow
That makes me white as snow;
No other fount I know,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.*

Robert Lowry (1826-1899)

And you will notice that it is God who initiates this invitation and opens the way for the sinner to come to Him. He says, *“Come now, and let us reason together...”* (Isaiah 1:18). I do trust that all who are listening to this broadcast today (or reading the transcript) have the wonderful joy of knowing that their sins are washed away. The psalmist, David (with all his many faults), knew that his sins were forgiven. In Psalm 103:12 he says that God had removed his transgressions *“as far as the east is from the west”* and who can measure that distance!

In passing you might be interested to know that scarlet is a natural colour, being a dye which comes from an insect or grub. I understand that even today scarlet is still derived from the crushing of a tiny insect called cochineal. Again some may wish to read more inference into this crushing in order to produce the scarlet dye, as a picture of the death of Christ. But what we have learned so far is that scarlet is both a striking and indelible colour.

Now for the short time we have left today, I want to look at the way scarlet was used in connection with the Tabernacle. We have already quoted from Exodus 25:1-4, where Moses begins to reveal God's plans for His earthly Tabernacle to the people of Israel. Scarlet was required for the intricate needlework which would form one of the four coverings forming the roof of the Tabernacle, the curtains (or vails), the gate, and some of the priest's garments. And there was also a requirement for "*rams' skins dyed red*" (Exodus 25:5). There can be no doubt that these skins would have been removed from sacrificed animals before being dyed red and they were then used as part of the covering (or roof) of the Tabernacle. In our opening remarks we mentioned the six colours which form the subject of our current series of talks. Four of these were woven together to form the first covering for the roof, the curtains (or vails) and the gate. They were also found in the ephod and on the hem of one of the garments which Aaron (the high priest) wore. These colours were blue, purple, scarlet and white. Now we mentioned that blue would speak of the heavens, and the heavenly man. Purple would indicate imperial authority. Next week, the subject is the colour white, and of course this would always speak of purity. But what of the scarlet (or red)?

Remember the rams' skins which were dyed red were only part of the covering of the Tabernacle. In fact they were the second layer (working from the outside in) and as such would be completely covered. They would neither be seen from the outside nor from the inside. Given the fact that these animals would have to be sacrificed in order to get their skins, I would think that the colour red could well symbolise blood or death in this case. I have been taught from a young age to look for typical teaching in the Scriptures, by that I mean a type, shadow, or picture in the Old Testament of a New Testament reality. When this is clearly seen, it can be really enjoyed. Perhaps one of the first pictures of the death of Christ and the formation of the Church is when God put Adam into a deep sleep (which would be a figure of death) and formed the woman, Eve, from his rib (see Genesis 2:21-23). If you are a believer on the Lord Jesus Christ, you can say that your place in the Church (which is Christ's body) is entirely as a result of His death. How we rejoice in that! But we need to be careful and not push the types of Scripture too far. I know there are Bible teachers who "spiritualise" almost everything in the Old Testament, but I don't necessarily go along with that. But let us enjoy what can be clearly seen in the Old Testament which speaks of Christ and His glory and the blessings we have, but let us realise that whilst all Scripture is for us, it is not all about us. It is always good to remember that the people of God in the Old Testament were the Israelites, but the Church is the people of God in the New Testament. These are two different companies and we do well not to confuse what the word of God says distinctly in relation to each.

It has been suggested that scarlet is the kingly colour and this would be the meaning of the scarlet in the embroidered works in the Tabernacle. This is certainly true; scarlet has and is often used by kings and sovereigns, as it is a majestic colour. It is certainly worth noting that in Mathew's Gospel, the Gospel in which Christ is presented as the Messiah King, we read that in mockery the soldiers stripped Him, and put a scarlet robe on Him (see Matthew 27:28). Crowning Him with a crown made of thorns, and putting a reed in His hand as a sceptre, they bowed mockingly before Him saying, "*Hail, King of the Jews!*" (see Matthew 27:29) In both Mark and John's Gospels the robe is described as "purple" (see Mark 15:17-20, John 19:2-5), and in Luke 23:11 it is "a gorgeous robe". Certainly it is fitting that the King, should be arrayed in scarlet, but remember this was done in mockery, by wicked men, who despised Him.

In my library I have several helpful books on the Tabernacle. Each goes into great detail as to the construction, the materials and the instructions given, and are very helpful. If this subject is of interest to you, there are many helps available to you for further study. We just have to be like the Bereans who checked the things they were hearing, against the Scriptures to see if they were so. One little booklet I have on the Tabernacle suggests, "Scarlet, in contrast to purple, occurs in Scripture only in connection with Israel." This sounds good, but then was it not a Babylonian emperor who clothed Daniel in scarlet! (see Daniel 5:29). Or what about the woman spoken of in Revelation 17:4 and Revelation 18:12-16, surely depicting a revived Roman power, arrayed in purple and scarlet. As I said, we need to be cautious about how far we push the types (or pictures) of the Old Testament! There is another little (almost throw away) comment in Proverbs 31:21 about the "virtuous woman" and how her household are clothed with scarlet. Taking all these together, I would suggest that there is an argument to be made that scarlet would symbolise power and privilege.

The gate and the curtains of the Tabernacle, embroidered with blue, purple and scarlet on a background of white linen must have been a striking sight! This was the only entrance into the Tabernacle, the only way to approach God, so doubtless these colours must speak of Christ and His glory and especially as the One who is the only way of salvation. In the words of Jesus Himself, "*No man cometh unto the Father, but by me*" (see John 14:6). Perhaps we see a display of these four colours in the four Gospels and the way each writer (under the control of the Holy Spirit) portrays the Saviour.

- In John, He is the Son of God (the blue);

- In Luke, He is the Son of Man (the purple);
- In Matthew, He is the King (the scarlet); and
- In Mark, He is the perfect Servant (the white).

There was a brilliant display of colour on the gate of the Tabernacle (which was very large and welcoming) and on the curtain through which the priests entered into the holy place, where they served before the LORD. As well as the four colours, there was also embroidered into the curtain (or veil) separating the holy of holies (or sanctuary) from the holy place, the cherubim, no doubt to emphasise the glory and holiness of God. It was behind this inner veil that the Ark of the Covenant was situated, the Mercy Seat, where God dwelt amongst His earthly people and where He had said to Moses, *“And there I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony, of all things which I will give thee in commandment unto the children of Israel”* (see Exodus 25:2). We read, too, that the ephod which Aaron, the high priest, wore was also made of these four colours, as well as being embroidered on the hem of his garment.

And so on balance, and I trust I have not over stretched the thoughts relating to scarlet (or red) in the Scriptures, this striking, indelible colour, would speak of the Lord Jesus Christ particularly in His glory as King in relation to Israel. I’m sure others will expand on this as we work through the six colours in our series.

Thank you for listening, and may God bless you all.

Notes

List of 26 mentions of scarlet in connection with the Tabernacle in Exodus

Exodus 25:4, Exodus 26:1, Exodus 26:31, Exodus 26:36, Exodus 27:16, Exodus 28:5, Exodus 28:6, Exodus 28:8, Exodus 28:15, Exodus 28:33, Exodus 35:6, Exodus 35:23, Exodus 35:25, Exodus 35:35, Exodus 36:8, Exodus 36:35, Exodus 36:37, Exodus 38:18, Exodus 38:23, Exodus 39:1, Exodus 39:2, Exodus 39:3, Exodus 39:5, Exodus 39:8, Exodus 39:24, and Exodus 39:29.

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