

Threads of Hope Devotion 14

Last month, we looked at the history of the iron. And we looked at some Scripture verses that urged us to “press” forward, not to sear our consciences as with a hot iron and to sharpen each other spiritually as “iron sharpens iron.”

What do you need to do before the ironing? Well, throughout the years, Tuesday was ironing day because Monday was wash day. You have to do the washing first! So today, we are going to look at the history of the washing machine.

From ancient times until about the time of the Civil War in America, people cleaned their clothes by beating them against rocks in a river. Some cultures added the abrasion of sand as an early cleanser. If washing in a river was not possible, many buckets of water had to be hauled to a washing station. The back-breaking task of laundry usually fell to women or to servants. Early sailors packed their clothing into cloth bags, added a rope and threw them overboard. The action of water being forced through the bag while being dragged for hours at least freshened their dirty laundry.

Ancient Egyptian medical documents, written on papyrus, show an early type of soap. A mixture of oils and salt was created to treat skin disease and also for washing of the body and clothes. Soap got its name from a Roman legend surrounding Mount Sapo, where rainwater running down the mountain-side mixed with ashes and the fats of animals to create a foamy clay-like substance that could be used for cleaning. Soap was not commonly added to an entire wash load but only used on stains. The use of lye on clothes, called bucking, was done every few months to freshen and whiten.

Colonial Americans washed clothes by boiling them in large cauldrons and beating them with a wooden paddle called a dolly. Clothes were laid on clean ground to dry. The metal washboard that we associate with pioneer life was patented in 1833. This inexpensive board required less water but more muscle to scrub away the dirt on its ribbed surface. Still, laundry largely remained a communal activity.

Some of the first washing machines were built in England and France, starting in the 1700's and continuing for over two centuries. Early models were called washing mills and most consisted of a metal or wooden tub that could be filled with clothes, soap and water and turned or rocked by hand. Some inventors added paddles or fingers inside the tub to agitate the clothing. One model featured a metal drum that could be turned over a fire. None included a way to rinse clothing.

Few Americans used washing machines until the mid-1800's. The first true modern washers were invented by James King and Hamilton Smith. Their patents featured a rotary machine exclusively for home use. A washing machine built by the Shaker community was featured at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876. The Shakers went on to create the Amana brand of appliances.

Washing machines were primarily steam or belt-driven until the invention of electricity. In 1908, the first electric washer, the Thor, became available for commercial use. The Thor featured a rotating drum inside a galvanized tub. Other electric models soon followed. Mr. F.L. Maytag of Newton, Iowa ceased the manufacture of farm implements to begin washing machine production and the Upton Machine Company of St. Joseph, Michigan debuted the Whirlpool machine—an electric motor driven tub with an attached wringer.

Still, these early models were expensive and bulky. Most lacked any suspension system and had to be anchored to the floor to keep them from agitating throughout the house. Early washers were devoid of any type of mechanized timing system. Wringer systems, consisting of two rolling cylinders to squeeze out water, had to be hand-fed and often injured fingers.

In 1936, a businessman in Fort Worth, Texas designed a community laundry named a Washateria. Thousands of customers, minus a machine of their own, came to use Mr. A. C. Tannahill's washing machines and the laundromat business was born.

The World Wars changed the laundry business as well. During World War I, a shortage of fats available for making soap forced chemists to create detergents made up of synthetic materials. Further research into creating detergents continued throughout the 1900's, including the introduction of the products Dreft, for delicate fabrics, and Tide, with a surfactant boost, by the Proctor and Gamble Company.

World War II suspended most washing machine manufacturing as materials were needed for the war effort. However, research on washing machine construction continued, resulting in a surge of new models and features when manufacturing resumed. The entire modern appliance industry boomed following the war and washing machines, and modern dryers, led the way. Still, it is estimated that less than 30 percent of the world's population own a washing machine. Almost 5 billion people still wash their clothes by hand.

The Bible has a lot to say about washing. The very last chapter of the Bible, Revelation 22, lists this advice in verse 14:

“Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life.”

Having washed robes is a description of a believer who has had their sins taken away. How is it possible to have sins washed away? There are some other Scripture verses that point the way.

Isaiah 64:6 tells us “**all of us have become . . . unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags**”. Apart from Jesus, we know that just doing good things isn’t the way to wash our robes and get rid of sin. We can’t do it by ourselves. But there is a solution—someone who can wash away all our sin since we are incapable of doing it. Malachi 3:3 describes Jesus this way: “**He will be like the refiner’s fire or the launderer’s soap.**” It is Jesus who does the work of washing away our sin. His blood on the cross can be described as the ultimate detergent, washing away every guilty stain. King David knew this when he wrote these words in Psalm 51: “**Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. Wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.**” The prophet Isaiah echoed these words in Isaiah 1:18 as he records, “**Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.**”

I love the imagery of this last verse. Did you know that red stains are the most difficult to remove from laundry? Yet, God tells us that even though our sin-stains are indelible and deep-dyed, calling out to Jesus for forgiveness and trusting in His sacrifice on the cross can completely remove our stains and make us as pure as white snow or white wool.

This month as you sew, or even as you do your laundry, think about Jesus as your launderer. Have you trusted Him as your Savior, your remover of sin stains? If not, you can do this today. The Bible tells us today is the day of salvation (II Corinthians 6:2) If you’re not sure about this, I would love to talk to you about making this important decision. Remember, too, that the purpose of Threads of Hope is to use the garments we make to attract boys and girls to the Gospel story by giving them the tangible love of a dress or pair of shorts. God is longing to wash us, to rid us of our sin. He sent His beloved Son to endure the agony of the cross and pay the price to redeem us. He longs to do the same for boys and girls, men and women around the world.

