



SHAME
Redeemed

Learning to Live
in Christ's Freedom

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Foreword by Curt Thompson



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Shame in the Beginning

ALL STORIES HAVE A BEGINNING. Our story begins not with our birth, nor our parents' birth, but with the God who is love. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three distinct persons in one perfect unity with each other. Into this perfect communion, we were created and invited.

In the beginning, the human relationship reflected the freedom and joy of the pure love of the Trinity: “Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame” (Genesis 2:25). In the Garden of Eden, we see life as it was meant to be: humans in joyful, loving dependence on God and joyful, loving interdependence with each other amid the beauty and abundance of creation. And they felt no shame.

Clearly there is a disconnect between the life God originally designed and the one we experience now. After the fall of humanity, much of our lives looks like the



Figure 1.1. *The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*

painting by the fifteenth-century early Renaissance artist Masaccio titled *The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*. You can see an angel



Figure 1.2. Detail from *The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*

of the Lord guarding the entrance to the Garden of Eden, because as a direct consequence of their sin, the tree of life is forbidden to Adam and Eve.

Take some time to gaze at this cropped picture of a fresco in the Brancacci Chapel in Florence, Italy, especially the faces of Adam and Eve.

Their body language and facial expressions reveal so much:

- Agony
- Despair
- Anguish
- Shame

There is guilt for disobeying God, but even more, a deep sense of shame for being exposed and expelled in their naked failure.

We immediately relate. Those feelings are so familiar to us:

- What have I done? How could I have been so stupid? How can I ever recover from this?
- I don't deserve to recover. Maybe I don't even want to recover. I need to sear this painful memory into my soul so that I never make such a stupid, costly mistake again.
- I feel so naked. So exposed. So alone. So rejected.
- This is the just punishment for my sin. I deserve to live a life of despair and agony. Paradise is lost forever. Because of my own stupidity.

I love this painting because it is so universally human. We viscerally connect to their lived experience of shame. Without defining

shame with words, we understand what shame is and how it affects us at a gut level. This painting captures the essence of how so many of us live: deeply ashamed of ourselves, our nakedness, our failures, and our sin. And we accept as unalterable truth that this agony is the life we deserve.

But this is not life as God designed. Something happened after Genesis 2:25, when man and woman were naked and felt no shame. Shame is one of our most basic emotions, ingrained within us at a very early age, often without much cognition attached to it. Children sense when people pull away from them or avert their gazes, and they internalize whatever leads to isolation or abandonment. To understand shame, we must briefly explore the related concepts of sin and guilt.

Sin, Guilt, and Shame

Sin, guilt, and shame all appear in the opening chapters of Genesis. They are distinct but overlapping. Each of them is complex, with multiple intersecting nuances, often experienced simultaneously.

There are multiple ways the Bible talks about sin. Most often, the Bible refers to sin as missing a standard of right thought or action. Another way the Bible presents sin is as iniquity—corruption due to deviation from a standard. Both ideas tend to emphasize the objective nature of sin, while a third idea, sometimes referred to as transgression, denotes rebellion or the breaching of a relationship, especially the covenant relationship between God and humanity. These three notions are not mutually exclusive nor exhaustive of the concept of sin, but together they reveal that sin is an objective truth with relational components. ***Sin, therefore, results in both guilt and shame.***

There are also multiple ways of defining and understanding guilt and shame. Broadly speaking, guilt is more action-oriented, while shame is paradoxically both internal and relational.



Guilt places emphasis on an action, like when you break a law. The feeling associated with guilt is often regret for making a mistake or doing something wrong. The resulting fear is of punishment, and the healing is found through forgiveness.

Shame has less to do with individual actions and more to do with your sense of identity, that you fail expectations or have disappointed someone, including yourself. Not only did you make a mistake; you yourself *are* a mistake. Shame causes fear of alienation or exposure, often accompanied by a devastating sense that you deserve condemnation. Healing is relational, found through reconciliation, primarily with God but also in community.

Let's first consider guilt in the Genesis story. God asked Adam directly: "Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?" (Genesis 3:11). Adam replied, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it" (Genesis 3:12). Adam freely admitted his guilt ("I ate it"), though he refused to take responsibility for his mistake. The woman likewise responded, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate" (Genesis 3:13). They both admitted their guilt, even while they blamed others. They did not lie or deny their disobedience. They knew they had broken the command given to them.

The consequences of guilt involve punishment, here found in the form of curses. God cursed the serpent, the ground, and child-bearing. This is how God dealt with the guilt of their sin. Then he cast Adam and Eve from the garden. Masaccio vividly depicts the agony of being expelled from Eden.

This is also how most of us have understood the gospel of Jesus: through the rubric of guilt and sin. We are guilty of sin. The punishment of sin is death. The good news is that Jesus paid the penalty on our behalf. We are now forgiven. This account of the gospel deals with the real problem of our sin and our guilt. This legal



metaphor of forgiveness for the debt of the guilt of our sin is good news. Shame isn't typically mentioned or addressed.

But for some cultures or people, their primary struggle is not with feeling guilty. For example, survivors of abuse feel shame when they should not feel guilty, since they are not responsible for someone else's heinous acts. They experience a shame problem caused by someone else's guilt. We need a gospel that addresses both the actual guilt of the perpetrator and the undeserved shame of the survivor. That means a gospel that not only addresses the penalty of sins, but also fully covers our shame and redeems us as beloved daughters and sons.

The Genesis story highlights the shame that stems from the sin of rejecting God and his rule. God's design and desire are for our flourishing. We were created to bear God's image but not to supplant God. We were intended to find our deepest joy through loving dependence on our Creator and interdependence with each other, and as stewards of creation.

By taking of the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve declared independence from God. They refused God's rule and sought to define good and evil for themselves. The result? Sin, guilt, and shame all became part of their lived experience: "Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves" (Genesis 3:7).

Shame Drives Us to Hide

Their sin did not make them naked; instead, it gave them awareness of their nakedness and the sense that this exposure was shameful and needed to be hidden. This shame at their physical nakedness extended to their relationship with God. When they "heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool

of the day,” instead of going to converse and commune with their Maker, “they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden” (Genesis 3:8). Fear replaced freedom when humankind chose to reject God’s way. Instead of becoming like God, Adam and Eve became ashamed. Humanity’s innocence and ability to be naked without shame were lost. And unfortunately, their relationships with God and with each other, once characterized by intimacy and freedom, became marred by insecurity and fear.

Adam and Eve hid from themselves, each other, and the Lord God. And they did so by perverting God’s creation. God had caused all kinds of trees to grow, “trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food” (Genesis 2:9). But instead of receiving these good gifts and thanking the generous giver, Adam and Eve took God’s gifts and twisted them to their own uses. They sewed together fig leaves and made themselves “coverings” (Genesis 3:7). This word “coverings” refers to a loincloth, which covers the bare minimum. Then when God called out to them, they used the trees that were intended for their enjoyment to hide.

Similarly, we use metaphorical fig leaves to hide from ourselves, each other, and God. Instead of using God’s blessings for his glory, we use them for our own purposes. With the wealth God gives us to bless others, we seek to impress or manipulate them. Or we take the gift of friends or children and make them into idols. Instead of doing all our work to the glory of God, we derive our worth from our accomplishments—or lack thereof. We rely on these fig leaves, and if someone takes them away, we will reach for palm trees next! We are not going to eliminate our coverings, because they are serving a very real purpose. We need them to cover our shame-based fears.

Adam was explicit about his emotions and rationale: “I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid” (Genesis 3:10). He hid because



he was naked and afraid. Shame is associated with four common fears that cause us to hide like Adam: fears of exposure, rejection, failure, and pain.

The first is the fear of *exposure*. The root of many fears is that when we are really honest with ourselves, we realize that there are a lot of things we really do not like about ourselves. Hopefully there are things we do like about ourselves, but there are also things of which we are ashamed. And we are afraid that if anyone else could see our true selves, then they also would not like us. They would make fun of us and reject us.

This is especially acute in the era of social media, where we have to carefully curate our lives and where the smallest mistake can go viral and destroy your life. A thoughtless comment can end up defining you and your life for a long time. That leads right into our next fear, the fear of *rejection*.

We fear that exposure inevitably results in being rejected. If people see the real me, then they will not want anything to do with me. If people find out about my mistake, then they will cancel me. That is why we try to cover up our faults with looking good and doing good deeds, hoping that people will respect us and accept us. For if we are exposed, then people will reject us.

We also fear *failure*. The fear of failure actually comes both to those who fail and to those who succeed. People tend to think that you only fear failure when you fail all the time. But actually, it is often highly successful people who fear failure the most, because they have the most to lose. The more you succeed, the more you feel like you have to keep succeeding. When someone succeeds a lot, their self-worth can get caught up in their success, and they fear that they will lose everything if they fail. Any failure would reveal them to be the impostor they fear is their true self.

A fourth fear is of *pain*. Many of us hide because we are running away from the pain in our past. Experiences of war or of abuse, whether physical or emotional or sexual—or all of them combined. We are afraid to face the pain, sometimes because we believe that it was our fault somehow. Sometimes we are afraid because the pain is just so great, and it feels overwhelming and permanent. We reason that nothing can change the past, and so there is no point in talking about it. We just need to move forward.

There are more fears that could be articulated, but the negative effects of shame are the same: isolation from God and others. Our thoughts and feelings bring us down:

- Nobody in the world knows the real me.
- Sometimes I'm not even sure who the real me is.
- There are things in my life that I have never dared to tell anyone else.
- I'm afraid of letting people get too close to me.
- I'm disappointed in myself.
- My life of regrets is no better than I deserve.

Somehow the story of Adam and Eve no longer feels old-fashioned and out-of-date. We really understand how they felt and why they reacted the way they did. It is functional! They used fig leaves to achieve some semblance of dignity, and this enabled them to talk with each other and with God. We, too, go for what is convenient and “good enough” for now.

Picture it: Adam and Eve, with makeshift aprons, crouching behind trees. This is not a good way of life. They can function, but is this abundant life?

In the same way, we can choose to hide ourselves from others and live our lives in fear. It is possible but definitely not ideal.



As Adam and Eve peeked nervously from behind the trees, they were likely afraid that God would come by and take away their protection and make them naked again. Those fig leaves were there for a reason: They did not want anyone to see their nakedness. We relate. We are terrified of being left naked, fully exposed. That is why we do whatever we can to hide and protect ourselves:

- try to be funny
- aim to be successful
- put on makeup
- work to fit in with everybody else

That makes us just like Adam and Eve, dressed in a ridiculous costume of fig leaves and cringing behind trees. It is pathetic. Is God insensitive to human fears? Does God strip them and make their fears come true?

God's Response to Our Shame

At the beginning of this chapter, we contemplated the painting by Masaccio, because when we look at it, we viscerally understand how Adam and Eve are feeling. We resonate with their shame and anguish. The image is so incredibly human.

It is also completely unbiblical.

Masaccio depicts what Adam and Eve deserved: to be stripped of the fig leaves they stole from God, cursed, and cast out of the garden naked, destined to wander in hopelessness and helplessness. But God did not treat them as their sins deserved (see Psalm 103:10). Look at Genesis 3:21: “The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.”

Instead of abandoning Adam and Eve to shame and utter humiliation, God showed mercy. Adam and Eve feared that God would



strip them, expose the shame of their nakedness, and lay them bare in their misery. God did indeed take away their fig leaves—but not for the reason they feared. God removed their loincloths—but not to leave them naked. He provided them better garments. Garments made of skin.

Garments of skin cannot come from the beautiful and delicious trees in the garden. They can only come from animals. The first recorded sacrifice of the Bible is not Cain and Abel sacrificing offerings to God. It is God sacrificing an animal in the Garden of Eden in order to clothe his wayward children.

This clothing God made is so much better than the coverings they patched together. These are not loincloths. This “garment” is a different Hebrew word, which is used eight times in Genesis 37 to refer to the famous multicolored coat of Joseph, the ornate robe that signifies his father’s favor. The robe that his brothers paint with blood when they fake his death.

But wait! It gets even better.

This clothing from God does not simply conceal physical nakedness but actually imparts status as children of God. In the ancient Near East, clothes were a sign of inheritance. When a son dishonored his parents, he had to leave his garment at the door of the house and depart. The robe symbolized his membership in the family, and relinquishing it symbolized his expulsion from the family. He became a stranger to the family, an outsider.

In contrast, God provided his disobedient, rebellious children with garments. Adam and Eve had rebelled against God. He had every right to disown them, but instead, he chose to give them robes that restored their honor and gave them status as his beloved children. Before Adam and Eve left Eden, God formalized his adoption of them as his children and heirs, assuring them of his

ongoing love for them and his undeterred commitment to sacrificially provide for them.

Here in the beginning, we behold “the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world” (Revelation 13:8). We see a God who does not let human sin derail his plan of love. He takes it on himself to provide the means for humanity’s restoration. Even though Adam and Eve had rebelled against God, God did not discard them. He covered them.

This is the good news that deals with the shame part of our sin problem!

What is illustrated in Genesis 3 is spelled out in Galatians 3:26-27: “So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” We deserve to live naked and ashamed, exposed and expelled. Instead of having our status diminished, we are clothed in Christ and freed to stand before God’s “glorious presence without fault and with great joy” (Jude 24). We are made free *through* our status with God, to be free *from* unhealthy shame, in order to be free *to be* unashamed.

Does God overlook sin? By no means! What Adam and Eve did was wrong and has consequences—God enacts judgment and punishment for the guilt of their sin. The serpent and the ground are cursed (Genesis 3:14, 17), and childbearing and working the ground become painful (Genesis 3:16-17). Sin is judged, but the focus of the story is not wrath. God’s persistent love takes center stage. There are negative consequences for sin, but good news is promised: Eve’s offspring will crush the serpent’s head (Genesis 3:15), and God clothes his children (Genesis 3:21).

The good news is that Jesus Christ has set us free from sin, guilt, and shame! God sent Adam and Eve out of the garden clothed.



Why do we so often settle for living in Masaccio's version of the story? Why do we default to acting as though the shame-filled life of agony, bitter regret, and fear is all we should expect for life after the fall? Too often we find ourselves avoiding God, lest he shame us further. Even though Christ has freed us, we feel bound by shame. We let ourselves "be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1).

God is inviting us to stand firm in the freedom for which Christ has set us free. Together, we can learn to revel in the truth that God does not punish us as we deserve. God consistently rescues and restores us: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt so that you would no longer be slaves to the Egyptians; I broke the bars of your yoke and enabled you to walk with heads held high" (Leviticus 26:13).

Spiritual Exercise: Being Clothed with Christ

Consider your morning routine of getting dressed. Whether you spend a long time contemplating your closet or you tend to grab whatever is closest to you, use the process as a cue to remind yourself of the glorious truth that you have been clothed with Christ. As you put on whatever shirt you choose, thank God that he loves you and has made you his child. Ask God to free you from any ways that you live as Masaccio painted. Pray that he will enable you to walk with head held high. You can use this sample prayer, or write your own:

God, as I put on my physical clothes, help me to know that you have clothed me with Christ. Free me from the agony of shame. Convince me that you have broken the bars of my yoke of slavery, and help me to walk with my head held high. You have covered me and made me your beloved child.



Show me how to stand firm in your freedom. In Jesus' name
I pray, amen.

Memorize

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then,
and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of
slavery. (Galatians 5:1)



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