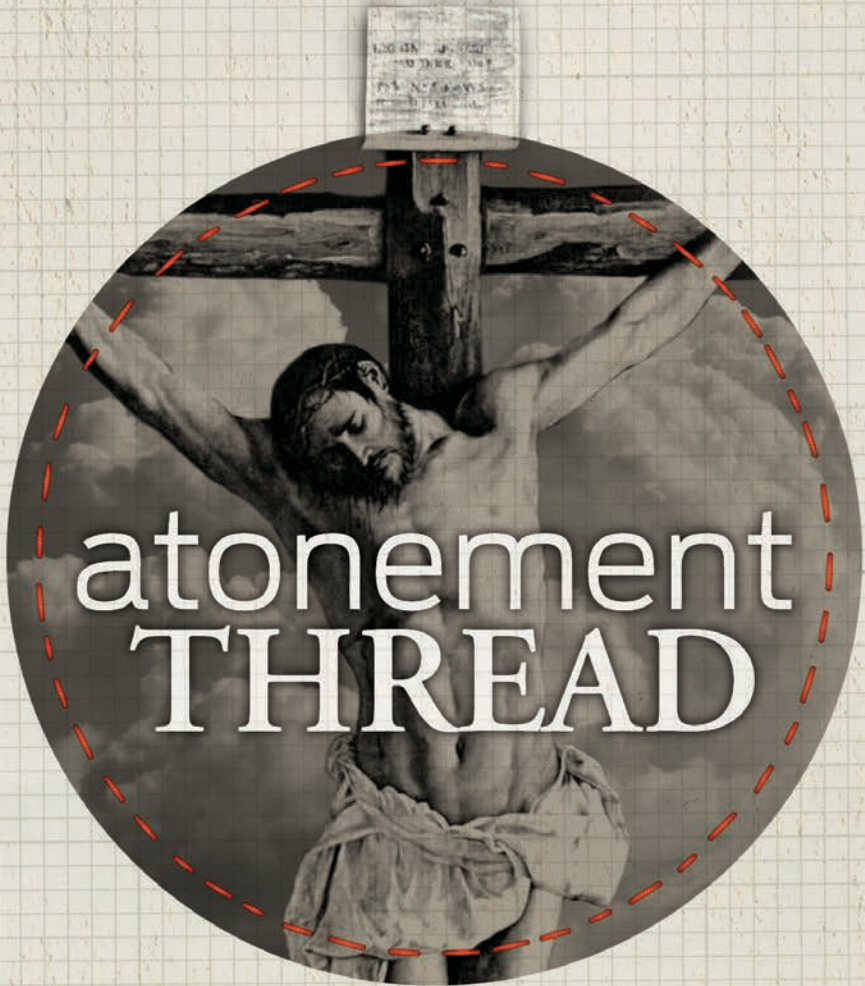


Small Group Study



Kendell Easley, Christian George,  
Joey Jernigan, David Nasser, and Halim Suh

THE  
**GOSPEL**  
**PROJECT**  
FOR ADULTS

Ed Stetzer General Editor Trevin Wax Managing Editor

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# *The Gospel Project*

## **Introduction**

Some people see the Bible as a collection of stories with morals for life application. But it is so much more. Sure, the Bible has some stories in it, but it is also full of poetry, history, codes of law and civilization, songs, prophecy, letters—even a love letter. When you tie it all together, something remarkable happens. A story is revealed. One story. The story of redemption through Jesus. **This is *The Gospel Project*.**

When we begin to see the Bible as the story of redemption through Jesus Christ, God’s plan to rescue the world from sin and death, our perspective changes. We no longer look primarily for what the Bible says about us but instead see what it tells us about God and what He has done. After all, it is the gospel that saves us, and when we encounter Jesus in the pages of Scripture, the gospel works on us, transforming us into His image. **We become God’s gospel project.**

## **Core Values**

### **Deep, but Not Dry**

We believe it’s best to expect a lot out of those who attend a small group. We don’t need to go only as deep as the least knowledgeable person in the group. We may have to “cut up the meat” for new believers and make sure the truth is accessible, but the important thing is that everyone has been fed and is sufficiently nourished.

### **Christ-Centered**

God is the primary Actor in the grand narrative of Scripture, and the gospel of Jesus Christ is the climax of this story. We approach the Old Testament as Jesus did: all the Scriptures testify to Him. We approach New Testament ethics and commands as implications that flow from the gospel—Christ crucified and raised.

### **Story-Focused**

Being Christ-centered naturally brings our focus to the overarching story that the Bible tells in four parts: Creation / Fall / Redemption / Restoration. This helps us connect the dots in the great story that tells the truth about our world and provides a hope-filled outlook on our world because of the future God has promised.

### **Mission-Driven**

Telling the story of the Bible is impossible without leading to mission, as the gospel reveals the heart of our missionary God and His desire to save people of every tribe, tongue, and nation. Keeping a focus on how the gospel leads us to mission is a crucial aspect of how we apply the Bible to our lives.



Balage Balogh / Art Resource, NY

## *Part 1*

# THE NEED FOR ATONEMENT

The scarlet thread of atonement is woven throughout the Scriptures, from Genesis to Revelation. Once Adam and Eve tasted the forbidden fruit in Eden, the need for atonement was made painfully clear. Their separation and shame required the first drop of blood in God's good creation as He covered them with animal skins. The need for blood and sacrifice set the stage for humanity's need of a Savior.



# Chapter 1

## Garden Coverings

**We Need Atonement to Cover the Shame of Our Sin**

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### VOICES FROM *Church History*

“From the early chapters of Genesis to the final chapters of Revelation we can trace what some writers have called a scarlet thread...which enables us to find our way through the labyrinth of Scripture.”<sup>1</sup>

–John Stott (1921-2011)

---

### VOICES FROM *Church History*

“Somewhere in the paradise of Eden the ground drank the blood of the first offering for sin, and from that harmless and blameless creature a coat was made to cover up the shame and the nakedness of the man and his wife. It is a picture of the covering, the atonement, the washing away of our sins in the sacrificial victim on the cross of Calvary.”<sup>2</sup>

–W. A. Criswell (1909-2002)

We've all done it. A thread dangles from the sleeve of a sweater, and without thinking, we pull it. But instead of tearing off, the thread gets longer. So we pull it again, hoping that will be the end of it. But to our dismay, the fabric unravels until we are left with a really long string and a really damaged sweater.

Like a strand of yarn running through fabric, the Bible also has a thread—an important theme—that stretches from the beginning of Scripture to its conclusion: the atonement. From Genesis to Revelation, we can trace this scarlet thread. It runs from our need for atonement in the garden of Eden to the provision of atonement through Jesus Christ. The Bible ends with the magnificent picture of a slain Lamb upon His throne surrounded by His people in robes washed white in His blood. Each book of the Bible, each story of Scripture, connects to each other, and ultimately, they point us to Christ's atoning work on the cross.

The New Testament writers understood the weave of the Word. Take Paul, for instance, a tentmaker who spent hours lacing leather to make a living. Paul was the one who showed us the connection between the first Adam and the last Adam (1 Cor. 15:45), the first death and the death of death (1 Cor. 15:22), the old nature and the new nature (Rom. 6:6). The author of Hebrews did the same, revealing that Jesus, like the high priest in the Old Testament, despised the shame that humanity experienced because of sin (Heb. 12:2).

From first to last, the Word of God is unified in its theme—a divine design that points to Christ, who knits us together in the womb (Ps. 139:13), calls us to trust in Him, and then wraps us in robes of righteousness (Isa. 61:10).

In this chapter, we see how the scarlet thread of atonement through the Scriptures is evident from the opening chapters of Genesis. Adam and Eve were created to know and love God and each other without shame or embarrassment. But when they sinned, they immediately felt shame and sought to cover their nakedness. In grace, God provided animal skins to cover their shame—an act that pointed forward to Christ's atoning work on the cross.

**We were created for lifelong communion  
with God and each other (Gen. 2:8-9,25).**

The Trinity. It all goes back to the shame-less society that exists among the three Persons of the Godhead—Father, Son, and Spirit. Forever together, this divine family has never experienced dysfunction, quarreling between Father and Son, jealousy, revenge, or disharmony. The three Persons of the Godhead have always been united in nature and mission. “Let Us make man in Our image,” said God to God (Gen. 1:26). And that's exactly what happened. Now look at where God placed the first humans:





**8** *The LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there He placed the man He had formed.* **9** *The LORD God caused to grow out of the ground every tree pleasing in appearance and good for food, including the tree of life in the middle of the garden, as well as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.*

We know from the first chapters of the Bible that God walked with Adam and Eve. He had fellowship with them. They were caught up in the joy of His triune being. There was nothing to fear, nothing to hide from, no reason to be ashamed. God created the first humans for lifelong communion with Him. And this communion also extended to each other. Look at how Genesis 2 ends:

**25** *Both the man and his wife were naked, yet felt no shame.*

Adam and Eve, as are you and I, were created in God's image. The problem came when humans tried to make God in our image. When Adam and Eve imposed their will over the will of God, they broke communion with their Creator. (More on that momentarily...)

Before the fall, humanity was in close relationship to divinity, living a life of perfect harmony. There was no guilt or embarrassment. There was no blame, bickering, or backstabbing. People lived with God in perfect transparency with Him and with one another.

Marriage was built on honesty and authentic love. No disguises or facades. No arguments, lies, or disrespect. It was paradise here on earth—a perfect environment—a “no clothes allowed” nudist colony in which its residents felt no self-consciousness or humiliation.

We don't know how long Adam and Eve lived in sinless communion with God and each other. But what we do know is that this was the original plan of God for His creation. It was this that God saw as “very good” (Gen. 1:31).

Can you imagine a life without shame? No lies to feel guilty for telling or pornography to feel guilty for watching. No stealing, coveting, cheating, gossiping.

A life without shame is a life without anxiety. It's a life without regret or remorse. Instead of disappointment, there is satisfaction. Instead of frustration, there is peace. Is this kind of life even possible in a world so full of chaos and danger?

God thinks so. In fact, this is exactly the kind of life God wants you to live. God wants you to live in harmony with His intentions for you. He commands us to surrender everything to the Christ who surrendered everything for us. That's how humans were designed to live—in lifelong communion with our Maker, a mirror of God's sinless, shame-less relationship with Himself.

When you and I are in right relationship with the triune God, we are once again given a glimpse of Eden's paradise. We get a taste of that place where everything is right and unified. When we pattern our lives on the life that God originally created us to live, we discover our true identity—men and women whose shame has been eradicated by salvation and whose guilt has been exchanged for grace.

### **Our sin results in shame (Gen. 3:6-13).**

It's true what they say: You never really appreciate what you have until it's gone. After Adam and Eve sinned, their innocence was gone. For the entirety of their lives they had lived without shame. They didn't think twice about their nakedness.

But now everything was different. Life was not as it used to be. They immediately sensed their inadequacy and failure to reflect the glory of God. So they decided to hide.

Adam and Eve offered differing accounts of their sinful choice, but one thing they shared in common—they covered themselves with fig leaves to hide their shame. Not only that, they also redirected the blame of their sin by pointing the finger at someone else. As we explore this story further, we discover how sin always leads to shame and blame. Let's take a closer look at the aftermath of the fall:

**6** *Then the woman saw that the tree was good for food and delightful to look at, and that it was desirable for obtaining wisdom. So she took some of its fruit and ate it; she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. 7* *Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.*

**8** *Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and they hid themselves from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. 9* *So the LORD God called out to the man and said to him, "Where are you?"*

**10** *And he said, "I heard You in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid."*

**11** *Then He asked, "Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"*

**12** *Then the man replied, "The woman You gave to be with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate."*

**13** *So the LORD God asked the woman, "What is this you have done?" And the woman said, "It was the serpent. He deceived me, and I ate."*



Have you ever wondered why God asks questions in the Bible? To Moses: “What is that in your hand?” (Ex. 4:2). To Elijah: “What are you doing here?” (1 Kings 19:9). To Job: “Have you ever in your life commanded the morning or assigned the dawn its place?” (Job 38:12). Even Jesus gets in on the interrogation: “Who touched Me?” He asked (Luke 8:45). Did God not know the answers to these questions? If so, why ask them?

Before Satan tempted Adam and Eve, question marks did not exist. Yet after their disobedience, God unleashed a barrage of questions toward those who bore His image:

- “Where are you?” (3:9).
- “Who told you that you were naked?” (3:11).
- “Did you eat from the tree that I had commanded you not to eat from?” (3:11).
- “What is this you have done?” (3:13).

When interrogated by the Creator, the two criminals crumbled. They couldn’t even get their stories straight. Adam told one account of what had happened. Eve told another. Yet both suspects shared a common instinct—to cover their shame and redirect their blame.

Adam and Eve covered their shame by sewing fig leaves together (Gen. 3:7). This took time, premeditation, determination, and deliberation. Humanity had never sewn before. In their desperation, Adam and Eve devised their own plan to cover up their shame, embarrassment, and nakedness.

Humans have been sewing ever since Genesis 3. Why? Because sin causes us to try to fix our mistakes. We may not sew literal fig leaves, but we do indeed rely on our own devices—our own weaving—as a remedy for our depravity. We sew coverings for ourselves to reduce our shame and make us feel adequate and in control.

For instance, have you ever spun a web of lies? It’s not hard to do. Just tell an “innocent” untruth to someone and watch it spin out of control. The problem is that when you tell a lie, you have to tell another lie to validate the first one, to cover the untruth. On and on it goes, lie after lie, until you don’t even know what’s true and what’s not. We sew and sew, doing whatever it takes to cover our shame and come out on top.

No matter how much we try to cover our shame, we fall short. The stain of sin is too deep. The disease of disobedience is too widespread. We can try to pin the sin on someone else (“It’s her fault!), on evil (“The Devil made me do it!”), or on God Himself (“You made me this way!”). But there’s no escaping the consequences of our rebellion. We are guilty of choosing to sin. We are ashamed of our failure to reflect God’s glory. Why are we ashamed? Because we should be. The feeling of unworthiness is telling us the truth about ourselves.

## We need atoning blood to cover the shame of our sin (Gen. 3:21; Isa. 54:4-5).

Adam and Eve failed in their fashion attempt to stitch leaves together—a wardrobe malfunction if ever there was one. But unknown to them, God was also in the sewing business. Leaves would prove too flimsy to abolish humanity’s sinful shame. Humanity needed different threads, stronger threads, scarlet threads. We needed fur, not figs. And in His grace, God was about to supply the skins.

**21** *The LORD God made clothing out of skins for Adam and his wife, and He clothed them.*

Both the Old and New Testaments teach us that sin leads to death (Rom. 6:23). After Adam and Eve rebelled against their Creator, they covered themselves with fig leaves, but God clothed them with another kind of fabric—the skin of an animal. Many Christians have seen in this story a glimpse, a foreshadowing, of the death of another creature—“the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). Only Christ’s death could atone for the sins of God’s people. Only His sacrifice could pay the price for humanity’s rebellious decision.

In this story we discover that even at the very beginning of the Bible, God was working to make everything right again. Through sacrifice and death, God ushers into the world life and peace. Because “the life of a creature is in the blood” (Lev. 17:11), the offering of Jesus’ blood gives life to all who put their trust in His sacrifice.

Not only were Adam and Eve’s exteriors in need of covering, their interiors were equally in need of atonement. So are ours. Paul made this argument in 1 Corinthians 15:22, when he wrote “as in Adam all die.” Humans are inwardly corroded, and that’s why we pass our depravity from generation to generation. Sin is in our bloodstream. It’s in our bones. We can’t escape it. We can’t deny it. No one teaches children to sin; it comes naturally, easily. We all receive Adam’s shameful, sinful blood type.

But here’s the good news. Jesus Christ offers us His blood. Listen to Peter’s encouraging words: “For you know that you were redeemed...with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish” (1 Pet. 1:18-19). The Lamb who died to clothe us is Christ. He is the One who gives us a blood transfusion—our blood for His blood, our shame for His spotlessness.



God not only took the initiative to cover the sins of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, He also made promises throughout the Old Testament to take away the shame of His people. Consider this promise God later made through the prophet Isaiah:

*4 “Do not be afraid, for you will not be put to shame;  
don’t be humiliated, for you will not be disgraced.  
For you will forget the shame of your youth,  
and you will no longer remember  
the disgrace of your widowhood.  
5 Indeed, your husband is your Maker—  
His name is Yahweh of Hosts—  
and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer;  
He is called the God of all the earth.*

Using the example of a barren young woman and then a widow, God promised to be the Husband who would not only wipe away the shame of His bride but also cause the former shame to be forgotten. Disgrace would disappear.

How would this take place? God would take the initiative again in the person of Jesus Christ come to rescue His bride—despising the shame of the cross (Heb. 12:2) in order to take our shame upon Himself. Christ endured a shameful death in order to grant us the gift of new life.

The church is the bride of Christ (Isa. 54:5). Like Eve, who was married to the first Adam, the church is wedded to the last Adam. The first Adam brought death; the last Adam brings life.

God didn’t forget us in our weakness. He loved us in spite of our shame. Isaiah recounted God’s promise: Because of the Messiah, “you will forget the shame of your youth” (54:4). He earlier noted that the Messiah would be “pierced because of our transgressions” (53:5), “like a lamb led to the slaughter” (53:7).

After the innocent flesh of Christ was mutilated, slashed, nailed, and punctured. The Roman soldiers offered Jesus a sip of wine to take the edge off, but we discover that He would not drink it (Matt. 27:34). Why not? If you were going into surgery, wouldn’t you want a numbing agent? Perhaps Christ experienced the surgery of salvation without anesthesia because He wanted to experience with full sensitivity the moment when our sins would be paid for. Christ didn’t want to be asleep for that transfusion. It was the very reason He had come to earth.

Adam had the luxury of having his abdomen sewn back together after God created Eve, but not Jesus. Christ's wounds never closed. Even in His risen state, His hands and feet bear the marks of His love. They are always open, always available for those of us who want salvation. Like doubting Thomas, we must reach out our hands and put them into His side (John 20:27). Every one of us is called to trust in Christ's atonement to cover our sin and shame. For "the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23).

### Conclusion

From the beginning of Genesis, we see the Creator crocheting His creation back together. You and I were created to be in God's image. We were designed with the same capacity for intimacy and community that God experiences among the three Persons of the Trinity.

When Adam sinned, our relationship with God and others came undone. But what the first Adam destroyed, the last Adam repaired. For this reason, and with that hope, you and I can continue to share with everyone we meet the life-giving, shame-covering truth that Jesus Christ won't stop until He makes all things new—even you!

---

### PRAYER OF *Response*

*"Eternal God, the refuge of all your children, in our weakness you are our strength, in our darkness our light, in our sorrow our comfort and peace. May we always live in your presence, and serve you in our daily lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord."*<sup>3</sup>

–Boniface



# Devotions

## AT-ONE-MENT

Hearts were never meant to break. In fact, they were originally designed to beat forever. When God created Adam and Eve, He supplied them with an organ that would endlessly pump blood throughout their veins. No heart attacks, no cardiac arrests. Just the perpetual beating of life, and the constant giving of love.

Then it all went to pieces. When humanity rebelled against divinity, God was “grieved in His heart” (Gen. 6:6). But not only did Yahweh suffer from a broken heart, humans realized that their hearts were broken too. No longer would we live forever. No longer would we enjoy perpetual health and awareness of God’s presence. Now, sweat poured from pores. Bones would now be broken. Men would suffer under the labor of toil; women would suffer under the labor of labor. Even worse, the relationship between God and man was shattered. That beautiful friendship became as broken and uprooted as the soil that humanity had to start plowing.

That is, until God paved a way for us back to paradise. Instead of abandoning humanity or drowning them in another flood, God gave the Israelites instructions on how to restore unity in their relationship with Him. Through the offering of sacrifices, the people could once again become “at one” with Yahweh. Humanity could once again be reconciled with divinity. Hearts could be restored. For this to happen, animals had to die—blood had to spill. But reconciliation with God was possible. At-one-ment was accomplished.

### Pause and Reflect

- 1 Have you ever suffered from a broken heart? Why is it far more tragic for God’s heart to break than yours? What breaks God’s heart?  
-----
- 2 In what ways is the “second Eden” going to be better than the first? How can we enjoy some of the benefits of heaven right here on earth?  
-----
- 3 What sacrifices has your Christianity cost you today? This week? This year?

# FAME AND SHAME

I'm not famous enough to know, but I hear that the paparazzi is a booming business. All you need is a camera, a reliable tip off, and the patience to stalk celebrities dawn to dusk. Some paparazzi get lucky and snap pictures of people at inopportune moments—when celebrities jog, swim, eat, or fall down. Those are the pictures that really “bring home the bacon”—moments that celebrities want to keep hidden from view.

There was a time when shame did not exist. In the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve felt no remorse—even when they were naked. Without sin in the world, there was no lust, adultery, embarrassment, or guilt.

But sin changed everything. The serpent was right when it told Eve, “your eyes will be opened” (Gen. 3:5). For the first time in her life, Eve saw things differently. Both she and Adam saw that they were naked. They had something to hide. The solution? Fig leaf fashion! Like celebrities hiding from the lens of a camera, Adam and Eve covered themselves and darted into the trees.

You and I cannot escape the all-seeing eye of God. The psalmist said, “You know when I sit down and when I stand up” (Ps. 139:2). But because of the atoning work of Christ on the cross, you and I can hide behind another tree—the only tree that can cover our most embarrassing sins. It was on the cross that Jesus hung naked and vulnerable (Matt. 27:28). Because He did, you and I will never have to.

## Pause and Reflect

- 1 If you could erase one mistake in your past, what would it be? How does God view that sin? How should you view it?  
-----
- 2 Read Isaiah 43:25. Why does God choose to forget our sins? What does this say about God's agenda in this world?  
-----
- 3 What's the difference between shame and guilt?





# HOLY HYPOCRITES

It's a word the world uses to describe Christians, and we hear it all the time: *Hypocrites!* Thing is, they're right. God's people are hypocrites. We strive to "be perfect, therefore, as [our] heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). But like Paul, we often fail (Rom. 7). If your life is anything like mine, you find that the more you try to be faithful to God, the more you become aware of your own unfaithfulness and need for restoration.

But Christianity is not about God making bad actions good. Instead, it's about God making dead people come to life! That's what society will never understand. We are all hypocrites because we are still confined to live in our sinful nature. But we are *holy hypocrites* because, in the midst of our sin, God gives us new natures. Holy and hypocritical are not mutually exclusive adjectives. In fact, they describe in perfect detail the struggle between our old desires and new ones—the war between guilt and grace.

Christians will always be portrayed in society as bigoted, narrow-minded hypocrites. We will always be rejected and persecuted, ridiculed and humiliated. Jesus promised as much (Matt. 24:9).

But even in the persecution, we can hold firmly to the promise that Christ is in the process of making us new creatures. He is in the business of forgiveness, and through Christ's atoning accomplishments, our new natures will ultimately win the war. Because of His great sacrifice, you and I can boldly approach the throne of God as righteous sinners, holy and hypocritical, deserving of punishment but rewarded with paradise

## Pause and Reflect

- 1 Jesus was the only human who wasn't a holy hypocrite. What can we learn about our own condition from observing His?

---

- 2 Even though you still have a sinful nature, you are instructed to progress in daily holiness. Why is our witness to the world so important for evangelism?

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**1** What is the benefit of reading the Bible with a central theme in mind? Why is it important to keep the big picture in mind when studying individual Bible stories?

---

**2** What does the placement of Adam in the garden of Eden suggest about the desire of God to satisfy the desires of His people? What do we learn about God by reflecting on His provision in Genesis 2?

---

**3** What are some of the ways people put up facades, fronts, or barriers when dealing with others? What are some common facades in the church? Why do we put up a front? Why is it important to be transparent before God and with each other?

---

**4** When someone calls you out on a mistake you made, what is your first instinct? Do you accept the blame or redirect it to someone else? Do you make excuses or accept the consequences of your actions?

---

**5** Read James 5:16. How can the spiritual discipline of confession help break down the barriers of shame or guilt?

---

**6** Like Adam and Eve, who actively sought to cover their shame, what “fig leaves” do we reach for to alleviate our feelings of guilt? Why are human actions always inadequate?

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**7** Read Hebrews 12:1. Why does sin so easily entangle us? How does shame for our sin cause us to stumble as we run the race of faith?

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**8** In Isaiah 1:18, we read, “‘Come, let us discuss this,’ says the LORD. ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are as red as crimson, they will be like wool.’” Why is sin too messy for humanity to clean up on our own?

---

**9** What does shame tell us about our need for atonement? How does the truth that Christ took our shame on the cross free us to run to God instead of away from Him when we sin?

---

**10** How do we present the gospel in a way that deals with shame? In what ways might shame or embarrassment keep us from living on mission?