SKIN IN THE GAME

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LIVING AN EPIC JESUS-CENTERED LIFE

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Skin in the Game: Living an Epic Jesus-Centered Life
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To every follower of Jesus who is, right now, offering their skin in the game to help set captives free.

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INTRODUCTION

The legend goes something like this . . .

In the late 1960s, the now-iconic investor Warren Buffet pried seed money for his very first stock fund from eleven doctors who'd agreed to kick in $105,000. Then, in an act of metaphoric chutzpah, Buffet added one hundred dollars of his own money to the kitty. No one knows exactly when the phrase "skin in the game" entered the American vernacular, but many pinned it on Buffet's experiment in financial poetry.[1] The now ubiquitous phrase captures the essence of an investment of heart and courage and risk, not the mere investment of money.

The idea is simple: You have no business asking others to trust you with their money if you're not willing to put your own resources at risk. If you have no "skin in the game," no stake of vulnerability, then your engagement is distant and rhetorical rather than personal and visceral. We might play fast and loose with others' resources but not with our own. Put another way, it's one thing to *work for* an entrepreneur; it's quite another to *be* the entrepreneur. The first involves little personal investment; the second demands our heart, our time, our sacrifice, our commitment—some real "skin."

When Araunah, the rich owner of a well-known threshing floor in Israel, offered King David not only his business but all the tools of his trade as well, so that David could build an altar to God, the King refused: "No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price, for I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God which cost me

nothing" (2 Sam. 24:24). David insisted on having his skin in the game—because a sacrifice that requires no sacrifice simply isn't a sacrifice.

Author and poet Henry David Thoreau wrote that "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation."[2] He was describing people who've chosen, with an inexorable bent toward pragmatism, to repeatedly step back from the precipice of risk. *They stubbornly resist putting their skin in the game.*

It's not hard to understand why. Life in a world decimated and twisted by sin can be punishing. We all know, from acute personal experience, that risk can bring both reward and devastation. And the difference between the two outcomes can often seem arbitrary. Healthy, well-adjusted people seem to have forged a tenuous balance between risk and prudence. But even though we are on a perpetual quest for that balance, there is no formula for it, and the stakes are high. So we weigh the consequences of our risk, and the older we get, the more our balance tips toward the safety of disengagement. We've seen too much. We know too much. And as a result, we "manage our risk" so well that we choke off the fuel our soul needs to stay alive—because taking risks is integral to our spiritual vitality.

> In the same way that God has created us to be dependent on oxygen for our physical survival, He has created us to be dependent on risk for our soul's survival.

Through all great literature and storytelling, there runs the universal thread of a main character who's uniquely ill-prepared for heroic deeds but who must meet the challenge nevertheless. Pick a favorite book or film—anything from *Don Quixote* to *The Hobbit* or *To Kill a Mockingbird* to *The Hunger Games*—and you'll run right into the "unlikely hero" archetype. Why? Because something inside

us resonates with this core storyline. We have an addiction to the David-and-Goliath theme that shows up consistently in the stories we love—a theme so compelling that we can't resist its "high."

Could it be that God himself has embedded *ordinary-but-heroic* in our soul's DNA as a siren call, beckoning us onward as we run our race? And could it therefore be that Jesus' words, "Whoever loses his life for My sake will find it," are among the sweetest words we'll ever hear? His words call the hero in us out from the shadows of the ordinary, urging us—to paraphrase missionary/martyr Jim Elliot—to give what we cannot keep in order to gain what we cannot lose.[3] After all, love would not be love that lowered its hopes to a settled life of "quiet desperation."

So what is the meaning of my life and your life?

However we may have answered this question in the past, a close examination of our responses will reveal an undeniable truth: to varying degrees, they all ring hollow. Most of the ways we evaluate our intrinsic value leave us with a bitter aftertaste. Professional success? Financial success? Being a good person? The pursuit of happiness? The American Dream? None of these satisfy. Even the relative few of us who say we "have it all" feel unfulfilled by what we've got and what we've achieved. A lot is never enough, and "more" never delivers on its hype.

How do we handle that? Typically, lacking a bedrock of significance for our lives, we act as if whatever ground we happen to occupy will suffice: "I always dreamed of playing professionally, but watching it on TV is as close as I'm going to get." "I'd always hoped to make it as a screenwriter, but a person can only handle so much rejection—and anyway, my degree, you know, is in business administration. It pays the bills and [conspiratorial wink] the mortgage on our condo in Hawaii."

Or we distract ourselves from the question of meaning altogether. Situated in the rich excesses of postmodern living, most of us have

all the resources we need to pursue our distractions for a lifetime, and many of us do.

Yet we have moments.

Moments when we wonder about the unmet hunger inside us.

Times when we feel an uncomfortable stirring, even a desperation, to discover whether there is something more congruent with our soul's longings than the false rewards of "the good life."

And when we look to Jesus, slowing down to study the provocative ways He engaged the needy, wounded, and desperate people who surrounded Him, we find the certain answer we crave.

God Has Chosen to Need Us

This truth is core to our identity and our purpose in life. And God refuses to back down on it. He wants our "skin in the game"; otherwise, it's game-over for our soul.

Of course, the God who is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent *could* choose to work alone. But instead, He elects (at great cost to Himself) to move through a body of people. He has done so from the dawn of time, and He is doing so now—through men and women like you and me who are far less prepared for kingdom-of-God adventures than Don Quixote or Bilbo or Atticus or Katniss were for their own exploits. *It is no stretch to say that God simply will not operate unilaterally.* Instead, He moves through and with willing partners. He insists that we offer the treasure of our *risk* as the admission price to the mother of all adventures: the beautiful advance of His kingdom and the epic redemption of His people.

With determination, God invites us to make His missional purposes our own. We see this repeatedly in Jesus' encounters with ordinary men and women:

- In the John 9 story of the man blind from birth, Jesus smears

a mixture of dirt and spit on the man's eyes, then tells him to go to the pool of Siloam to wash away a lifetime of darkness. What gets lost in this odd and remarkable story of healing is this: Jesus asks a blind man with spit-mud on his face to find his own way through town to a pool, where he can complete the process of healing. Why? Would *you* force the man through such an unnecessary gauntlet of shame and uncertainty? Of course not. But Jesus wanted the man's skin in the game.

- In the John 5 story of the crippled man who has languished by the pool of Bethesda for thirty-eight years, Jesus asks a question so obvious that it is either ridiculous or offensive or both: "Do you want to be healed?"

  Of course he does. That's why he's there. Everyone in town knows why scores of sick people wait by the poolside. Periodically, an angel of God stirs the water. The man hopes to be the first one in, thus finding healing for his lameness. Yet Jesus still insists on asking, "What do you want?"

  The non-negotiable here looms large: the man must give evidence that he has skin in the game before Jesus will offer him what he says he wants most. And the man rises to the challenge: "Yes! I want to be healed."
- In Matthew 15, the Canaanite woman grovels, pleading with Jesus to heal her daughter of demon possession. But the Master first ignores her, and then when he does turn his attention to her, it is with apparent scorn: "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs " (v. 26).

  Where's the love in a response like that? For a moment, the air is thick with awkward silence. But Jesus' true motive behind His question is revealed in the woman's reply and His own response to it.

  "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table," she answers.

> "Woman, you have great faith!" He says. "Your request is granted."
>
> Jesus' purposeful offense demands that the woman put her skin in the game—and when she does, He is delighted, and His heart toward her becomes clear (vv. 27–28 NIV).

We have only scratched the surface of these uncomfortable and curious encounters. In every instance, Jesus asks those who would follow Him to be co-participants in His work. He will kick in the $105,000 seed, contingent only on our feeble but mandatory hundred dollars. Ours is the "widow's mite"—but it is also the coin that He's decided will ultimately tip the scales.

This truth answers so many of our questions about God's movement in our lives. God will not do alone what He chooses to do with us. Yet we are often unwilling to accept, or are simply unaware, that our *risky and personal investment* is a prerequisite.

> We do not give ourselves over to Jesus, body and soul, without a fight. That is why He coaxes us out of our bunker mentality with eight forceful questions. These questions drag us out of our unconscious passivity and, if we choose, entice us to step out of our security zones into the epic, Jesus-centered adventure we were made for.

Behind the mysterious biblical accounts of Jesus' encounters with the "quietly desperate," you'll find a question in each of the following eight chapters. But they're not just the stuff of which great Bible stories are made. We, too, are confronted with them repeatedly in our everyday lives. And how we answer them will determine whether we experience the life God intends for us or the life we are tempted to merely endure. Risk is merely our turning of the knob on a wardrobe door that opens into Narnia.

FOR DISCUSSION OR PERSONAL REFLECTION

- On a 1-to-10 continuum between "Safety" and "Risk," where would you put yourself, based on the way you live your life? What are the primary reasons why you are there?
- If you were audited by an impartial angel who had access to every nook and cranny of your life, in what areas would that angel determine you have skin in the game, and in what areas would he determine you've been averse to taking "good risks"? Why is there divergence in these areas?
- Which "unlikely hero" from a film, book, play, or song resonates with you most strongly, and why?
- In the table of contents, which one of the eight questions that make up the chapter titles draws your interest the most, and why? Which one makes you feel particularly fearful, and why?

CHAPTER 1

WILL YOU FACE YOUR SHAME?

The Story of the Notorious Woman and the Accidental Well

"It is the false shame of fools to try to conceal wounds that have not healed."

—Horace

When I was fifteen years old, my family made its triennial trek from Denver across the Kansas Serengeti to visit my mother's relatives in Missouri. I hadn't seen my cousins in a few years, so I was a little startled to see Debbie, who is six years older than I, walking with a noticeable limp. Actually, it was more dramatic than a limp. When she walked, she literally dragged her left leg behind her, swinging it forward as if it had gone to sleep.

I vaguely remembered someone telling me that she had some sort of chronic disorder (multiple sclerosis, I found out later), but back then, the only thing that mattered in my teenage-guy world was a particular kind of currency called humor. My cultural pantheon

started and ended with Monty Python. So early on in our visit, walking behind Debbie down a sidewalk toward the car, I decided to spend a little of my humor currency: I mocked Debbie's exaggerated gait by dragging my leg, just like she did. I laughed at myself and quickly looked around to make sure the others had noticed my comic brilliance. They had—but they weren't laughing. And, suddenly, the reality of what I'd done sank in.

The shame was almost instantaneous. My face burning, I begged God to let me go back in time so I could erase those five seconds of cruelty. Instead, I wallowed in my sin for the rest of my family's visit. I feel the faint burn of shame even now when I describe my inexplicable behavior.

It all happened almost four decades ago, but the details are etched forever in my memory. That's because shame leaves an indelible imprint on us. Like Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth, we cry, "Out, damned spot!" as we try—and fail—to rub away the stain from our soiled hands.

Shame is an unforgiving master. It taunts our God-given identity, bullying us into a life of hiding and caution. Shame reorients our reality by distorting how we see ourselves and the people who relate to us.

For one long-ago woman of Samaria, shame was what caused her to venture out in the middle of the day, when the sun beat its hottest on the cracked earth, to draw water from the community water source outside the city walls of Sychar.

Picture her heading toward Jacob's Well. Why does she choose this time? Because she's a notorious woman, a target for the kind of murderous whispers that kill the soul, and now is the time when she's least likely to encounter other townspeople.

But today, someone else does show up. Left alone by his disciples, who are in town scouting for supplies, Jesus is sitting at the well when the woman arrives to draw water. He's tired, hot, and thirsty, and he asks her to give Him a drink. But his request quickly surfaces a cautious response that is rooted in the shame of her ethnicity and

her gender and her reputation. "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?" she asks (John 4:9).

In response, Jesus tells her that she has, essentially, hit the jackpot: standing before her is the Source of "living water," the kind she can drink and then never thirst again. Her hope kindled, the woman begs Jesus for some of that water. For her, it represents freedom from having to travel to the well, where every day she is reminded that she is a serial-rejected woman and an outcast living under the shadow of her shame. So instead of skirting her shame, Jesus draws it out like a poison: "'Go, call your husband and come here.' The woman answered and said, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You have correctly said, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; this you have said truly'" (John 4:16–18).

Now the woman must decide what she will do: face her shame or shrink from it. Will she drink what Jesus is offering her or do what most of us would do and make an excuse to cover her retreat? It's the choice all of us who would enter into the life Jesus invites us into must make. Will we stop hiding *in* our shame and *from* our shame and instead drag it into the light, where it can no longer leverage us? Because the adventure Jesus beckons us into is lived out in the light. There is no darkness in Him, and everything that lives in the shadows will be called out of hiding. "For nothing is hidden that will not become evident, nor *anything* secret that will not be known and come to light" (Luke 8:17). On the journey that will lead us, ultimately, to freely offer our skin in the game, the first question Jesus asks us is both simple and terrible: "Will you face your shame?"

> Put another way, Jesus is asking, "Will you come out and play?"

When we are young, responding to the invitation to "come out and play" is as natural as breathing. But over time, our play

response is hampered and even destroyed by the progressive advance of shame through our soul's fortifications—the mortar fire of everyday life blows holes in our walls, making it seem unsafe to play. Of course, original sin is just another way of saying that we are all born into a kind of fundamental shame, and life's embarrassments and indignities and failures quickly accelerate its impact on us. Our fundamental shame is like a roadside bomb—it has latent explosive capability that is released when something in the external environment triggers it, causing indiscriminate collateral damage. In other words, shame blows our legs out from under us, making us all "disabled" in the truest sense.

Shame's impact grows over time for a simple reason: just living in a fallen world exposes us to an environment fraught with things that can trigger shame. This is why so many of us suffer from social anxiety disorder, whose defining characteristic is the "fear of negative evaluation by others." Shame is a worldwide epidemic. In the Asian world, for example, shame and "saving face" are primary psycho-social forces, shaping the soul of both the individual and the culture. The Japanese have a word, *hazukashii*,[1] for the cultural expectation that one must at all costs avoid bringing shame to the family name. In Chinese culture, there are 113 unique shame terms embedded in the language.[2]

Harvard researchers have boiled it down to this: "Shame functions as a social control mechanism that makes use of the emotion's aversive properties." In other words, shame exerts a powerful leverage on us.

The Psychology of Shame: A Thumbnail Sketch

Dr. Allan Schore serves on the clinical faculty of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at UCLA. His research into the factors that fuel *attachment theory* sheds light on the foundations of our shame. Attachment theory is a psychological construct

that explores why an infant *must* develop a close relationship with at least one primary caregiver in order for social and emotional development to advance normally.

Researchers have discovered that, contrary to conventional wisdom, our genetics are *not* set in concrete at birth. There is far more genetic material in an infant's brain at ten months, say, than at birth. Schore says, "One of the great fallacies that many scientists have is that everything that is before birth is genetic and that everything that is after birth is learned. This is not the case."[3] The part of the brain that is core (or "primitive") is the brain stem, and it's the *only* part of the brain that is fully developed at birth. The rest continues to form at a rapid pace over the first two years of life as the neurons develop a protective sheath and establish connections with each other. This two-year construction project is highly influenced by environmental factors—"triggers" that surround us as we grow into toddlers. And, by far, our primary caregivers control the lion's share of them.

Clinical psychologist and author Joseph Burgo says, "When things go wrong between parent and child in the first two years of life, you [the child] are permanently damaged by it in ways that cannot be erased. The awareness that you are damaged, the felt knowledge that you didn't get what you needed and that as a result, your emotional development has been warped and stunted in profound ways—this is what I refer to as *basic shame*."[4]

The reality is that basic shame—or what I've called "fundamental shame"—is inescapable for everyone born into a world profoundly altered by sin. On a spiritual level, our "birth canal" was filled with toxic water. Not a person on earth has escaped the sin bath, and once we come sputtering out of it, much lies in wait for us to trigger our shame: A mother, damaged herself, feels exasperated by her infant daughter rather than delighted. An uncle, sick with a shattered soul, touches a helpless little boy in sexually abusive ways. A father, stressed by his responsibilities and hollowed out by hidden

sins, unfavorably compares his little girl to her "little blonde pixie" best friend. These indiscriminate and often unintended incidents create "subluxations" in our core identity which alter the way we see ourselves, others, and God.

Subluxations and the Chiropractic of Shame

In the world of chiropractic, a subluxation is a misalignment in the spine that affects one's neural performance. When you have a subluxation, your nervous system's normal functioning is compromised, much like a clogged fuel jet in a carburetor leads to a sputtering engine. And a "sputtering" spinal column can lead to all sorts of problems we normally associate with medical conditions that require prescription drugs or surgery.

Chiropractors rouse the suspicions of the medical community because they speak a kind of heresy: *Instead of medicating the problem, most conditions can be treated by fixing the subluxation that caused it.*

In Romans 1:19–20, the apostle Paul says, in essence, that everything in the created world is a parable about who God is and how He operates. These parables are embedded by God in His creation, waiting to be discovered. So maybe subluxations of the spine can teach us something about another kind of subluxation—the misalignments in our soul caused by shame; the degenerative subluxations that keep us from functioning as God intended and living freely out of our truest identity.

Is it possible for us to experience a realignment of our soul—a kind of spiritual chiropractic adjustment that allows us to overcome the damage shame has caused?

Experts such as Dr. Burgo say such damage cannot be erased. Burgo explains, "Cognitive-behavior therapy might teach you some useful techniques for coping with your damage, but it won't make you into a different person. No matter what you do, you'll never be just like the person who went through the emotional experiences she

needed during that critical period. . . . Toxic shame so poisons one's sense of self that the usual remedy is flight into various types of narcissistic behavior."[5]

Apparently, we cannot gain back the shameless, clean slate we had in the womb—the pristine identity that was "fearfully and wonderfully made" in the image of God. We cannot climb back into our mother's womb and go through the birthing process again, can we?

That is exactly the objection a Pharisee named Nicodemus raised when Jesus told him, matter-of-factly, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3).

It helps to slow down and pay better attention to what Jesus is saying here. We cannot "see" the kingdom of God unless we are born again—and that is because our basic shame, compounded by the thousands of trigger experiences of shame we encounter in our life, clouds our soul's lens and taints everything we see. A rebirth is our only hope—but not simply a rebirth into the same world of sin and shame we've already experienced. We need a rebirth into a new world—a world called the kingdom of God. It sounds ridiculous, but this is what Jesus offers the woman he meets at the well outside of Sychar.

Five Minutes with Jesus by a Well Outside of Sychar

The Samaritan woman's story of hope is our story of hope. It is possible to move past the dead end of our shame and into the wide thoroughfare of our true identity and our strategic purpose in the kingdom of God. It is possible not merely to cope with our damage but to become a regenerated person. It is possible for us to *see* the kingdom of God, and therefore, it is also possible for us to put our skin in its game.

Let's camp for a moment in the experience of the notorious woman of Sychar in John 4:3–42 and find from her journey with

Jesus the trail markers for our own journey. We'll carefully consider each move in their verbal chess match.

1. "Give Me a drink."

Jesus is the shrewdest man who ever walked the earth, and so he begins His benevolent attack on the woman's shame with an invitation to serve Him. He knows, as we generally do not, that He can find the leverage He needs to pry open our soul and expose the dark beliefs we hide about ourselves by simply asking us to help Him.

Right away, we must wrestle with feelings of unworthiness that lead to doubt and caution. When Dr. Brené Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston's graduate college of social work, first gave a twenty-minute presentation on the necessity of vulnerability for living a "whole-hearted life" at a 2011 TED conference, she woke up the next morning gripped with shame and anxiety. For the five hundred people in attendance and, later, the four million who watched her presentation on YouTube (making it the most-watched TED talk of all time), Dr. Brown's bare-faced revelations about her own struggles with vulnerability were a life-giving revelation. But for her, like the woman standing by the well outside Sychar, the act of giving what she had to give unleashed a raging torrent of shame.

"Shame drives two big tapes," says Brown: "'Never good enough' and, if you can talk yourself out of that one, 'Who do you think you are?'"[6] When we are asked to give and we do, we are certain to wrestle with the dragon called shame that has been summoned from our dungeon. Jesus knows what He's doing when He asks us to serve Him.

2. "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?"

Put another way, the woman is asking Jesus: "Do you know who I am, really? I am obviously the sort of person you should not be

talking to—Jews like you treat people like me like scurvy dogs, and my gender alone should make me off-limits to you." The incredulity we have about our own worth or status exposes the shame that is driving our beliefs—the poison we've ingested is driven to the surface.

3. "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."

When we have started to admit what we really believe about ourselves, Jesus turns the tables. In effect, He tells us, "I already know who you are to the depths of your soul, but you know next to nothing about Me. If you had an inkling of My goodness and the rich treasures I long to give You, you'd be desperate for Me. But you won't ask, because your shame won't let you receive anything from Me." Jesus offers us a taste of what our soul most craves, dangling it in front of us, enticing us to come out of the shadows and into the light.

4. "Sir, You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep; where then do You get that living water? You are not greater than our father Jacob, are You, who gave us the well, and drank of it himself and his sons and his cattle?"

It's a certainty that we will, at least initially, push back against the invitation Jesus offers us by questioning His ability to give us what we really need. In essence, we can't help but test His promises to us, because shame has taught us that most people in our life don't keep most of their promises most of the time—at least, the promises that really matter to us. Is Jesus really able to deliver what He's offering? If my other caregivers failed to wholly love me, why should I trust a God who has not proven Himself to me? And if other "experts" have taken their best shot at helping me and failed, why should I expect a different result from a Jesus who talks big but may not have the capacity to deliver?

5. "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again; but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life."

Here Jesus separates Himself from all our other caregivers. He tells us, bluntly, that the many solutions we've pursued to heal our shame are at best temporary fixes. The people we've trusted before have all failed us in one way or another. The "good life" turns out to be a hollow pursuit with quickly diminishing returns. (This helps explain why the United States has the highest suicide rate in the world, even though we also have the highest standard of living in world history.)

But Jesus offers a permanent fix—an ongoing and refreshing source of identity that will finally quench our thirst. He makes a bold statement of ability and outcome. Is it too good to be true? This is the tipping point He brings us to. We stand on the divide between the path of retreat and the path of advance. Will we capitulate to our shame, or face it and extend our hand to grasp the already-extended hand of Jesus?

6. "Sir, give me this water, so I will not be thirsty nor come all the way here to draw."

The woman takes the biggest risk of her life—she allows her desperate thirst to overrule her desperate shame. She asks for what Jesus is offering. This is more vulnerable and risky than a quick reading of this encounter assumes. This is a woman convinced of her unworthiness, so allowing herself to hope is perhaps the bravest thing she's ever done. In fact, asking for what we've always believed is impossible may be the most vulnerable thing any of us will ever do and therefore the most courageous thing we'll ever do.

"I've come to the belief," says Brené Brown, "that vulnerability is our most accurate measurement of courage."[7] And so the woman by the well is taking the road less travelled by facing down her shame

and boldly asking for what she most wants. But she hedges a little, too; she wants her thirst to be quenched, and she also wants to hunker down at home and avoid the embarrassment and pain of the crowd's whispered judgments.

7. "Go, call your husband and come here."

Jesus, it turns out, refuses to offer partial solutions to our problem of shame. When we barter with Him for safer alternatives to His redemptive mission in our lives, He will not negotiate. Instead, He targets the thing we've kept well-hidden, the thing we swore we'd keep buried forever. He wants us to face it.

8. "I have no husband."

The woman fudges the truth about her situation with a half-truth that hides her brutal reality. Like her, we will do anything to avoid fully facing our shame—and we are well-skilled at evading others' pursuit of it. So we equivocate and stall and dull the edges of the knife's blade: "Can I take a pill instead of surgery?" And Jesus, instead, produces a scalpel.

Jim Stockdale was an officer and prisoner of war in the infamous "Hanoi Hilton" during the Vietnam War. He was imprisoned for eight years, from 1965 to 1973, and was relentlessly and ruthlessly tortured. But he survived the experience, and the way that he survived has now been studied and taught around the world. It's called the Stockdale Paradox.[8] The key to survival, as author Jim Collins framed Stockdale's experience, is this: "You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be."

Jesus operates, all of the time, in the tension described by the Stockdale Paradox. He will move us to face the "most brutal facts of our current reality, whatever they might be." But He reassures us with absolute certainty that we will "prevail in the end."

9. "You have correctly said, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; this you have said truly."

Jesus not only points out her shame, He rubs her nose in it. That's because, for her and for us, shame must become an acknowledged reality before He can confront it. We can't give Him permission to heal us if we don't admit the truth about our "disease." And the truth is, we don't merely have a shame-cold—we have shame-cancer.

One way we know Jesus is "not of this world" is this: when we would back away from a wound that is so tender it hurts us to look at it, He pushes into that wound instead. He's intent on healing us, not serving up hollow platitudes that ignore the obvious, festering side effects of our sickness. Once the truth of our shame is in the open, we can invite the sort of treatment that matches the disease.

That is why Jesus relentlessly dismantles our hiding strategies—because, as Dr. Brown says, "[Shame] needs three things to grow exponentially: secrecy, silence, and judgment."[9] All three forces are at play in the Samaritan woman's life. And exposure to the blinding light of truth is the only force strong enough to counter them.

But Jesus is not the sort of physician who says, "I know what's wrong with you, and I'm going to treat you whether or not you want Me to." He wants our invitation.

10. "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. . . . I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ); when that One comes, He will declare all things to us."

Jesus has just hauled her shame into unwavering light, and it's humiliating to have something so ugly exposed. What do we do when our hidden ugly becomes our outer ugly?

We could make an excuse and slink away. Or we could blow up and demand an apology. Or we could turn the tables and try to defame our defamer. Or . . .

We could give in to the truth, accept the reality of our shame, and name our Healer.

When we decide to let Jesus do something about our shame, we will always name Him Lord and Messiah. It's a statement not only about His identity but also about our posture toward Him. It's the bended knee of faith—faith in His ability to do what He promises because of who He is. And faith is not something we work up; it's a truth we desperately embrace. So, when we name Him "Messiah," we are offering Him access to our soul's most vulnerable places as He hovers over them, holding His scalpel.

11. "I who speak to you am He."

Jesus asserts His true identity—and more. He assures us that he has the power, authority, and skill to get the job done. He not only offers us living water, but He also delivers on that promise. What psychology, self-discipline, and determination can't do on their own, He can do. And the proof of it, here by the well outside Sychar, is that a woman who has long lived in a prison of shame—the same woman who has been written off and marginalized in the public square—heads back inside the city walls to tell even her detractors that they too can find hope for healing their shame if they'll drink the living water of the man by the well. She is a new creation because she has taken a big gulp of that living water. And so the last person you'd expect to tell anyone about the Messiah becomes the first Christian evangelist in history. She is "born again"—and that is a miracle.

The Reiteration of Paradise

Despite his assertion that basic shame is irreversible, Dr. Burgo does claim that a long-term relationship with a psychotherapist (who models healthier responses than the narcissism most of us default to) can blunt shame's influence enough to make it tolerable. But this is only a faint echo of the bellowing voice of Jesus telling us we must be born again and offering us living water—which is, in the end, really Himself. His promise is "paradise"—it's the gift

he offered Dismas, the name given to the thief on the cross who defended Jesus before a mocking crowd and received Jesus' promise, "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43 NIV).

The words "with me in paradise" are, functionally, a reiteration. I mean, "with me" and "paradise" are really the same thing when the Me is Jesus. To be with Him—not in a geographical sense but in a spiritual and more romantic sense—is to be in paradise.

Paradise is actually a transliteration of the Greek word *paradeisos*, which is rooted in the Old Persian word *pairidaeza*, meaning "enclosure." More literally, it refers to the garden of God in the creation story (Gen. 2:8–10, 15). What if the garden of Eden, the place where Adam and Eve walked with God "in the cool of the evening," is not only hovered over by the Spirit of Jesus but is a representation of Jesus Himself? And what if the intoxicating scent of Jesus that we sniff when He confronts us with our shame lures us out of our smelly prison into the paradise of His presence? There is a pathway into God's garden, where we can wholeheartedly offer up our skin in the game, but we must leave our shame at the gate. He will help us do it, if we let Him.

FOR DISCUSSION OR PERSONAL REFLECTION

- Close your eyes and ask God to take you back to what might be called a "moment of shame" in your life. How did that experience impact you in the short and long terms?
- How did your parents help you feel either less or more fundamental shame in your life? Condense your answer into a single sentence.
- What are some ways in which you relate to the woman at the well? What are some ways you find it hard to relate to her?
- Is it generally easy or hard for you to trust God? What's the main reason why?

- How do you find Dr. Brown's statement that "vulnerability is our most accurate measurement of courage" true in your own life?
- Reflecting on your life, what are some ways Jesus has dragged your shame into the light? What happened when He did?
- How have you been drawn more deeply into relationship with Jesus as you have struggled with the side effects of shame in your life?