

S H A M E

31-DAY DEVOTIONALS FOR LIFE

A Series

DEEPAK REJU

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S H A M E

BEING
KNOWN AND
LOVED

ESTHER LIU



P U B L I S H I N G
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To David Powlison:

The legacy of your ministry and love
is found on every page of this book,
and I would have it no other way.
Thank you for everything.

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A Scripture quotation from the New Testament uses the ESV's alternate, footnoted translation of *adelphoi* ("brothers and sisters").

Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

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How to Nourish Your Soul

A LITTLE BIT every day can do great good for your soul.

I read the Bible to my kids during breakfast. I don't read a lot. Maybe just a few verses. But I work hard to do it every weekday.

My wife and I pray for one of our children, a different child each night, before we go to bed. We usually take just a few minutes. We don't pray lengthy, expansive prayers. But we try to do this most every night.

Although they don't take long, these practices are edifying, hopeful, and effective.

This devotional is just the same. Each entry is short. Just a few tasty morsels of Scripture to nourish your hungry soul. Read it on the subway or the bus on the way to work. Read it with a friend or a spouse every night at dinner. Make it a part of each day for thirty-one days, and it will do you great good.

Why is that?

We start with Scripture. God's Word is powerful. Used by the Holy Spirit, it turns the hearts of kings, brings comfort to the lowly, and gives spiritual sight to the blind. It transforms lives and turns them upside down. We know that the Bible is God's very own words, so we read and study it to know God himself.

Our study of Scripture is practical. Theology should change how we live. It's crucial to connect the Word with your struggles. Often, as you read this devotional, you'll see the word *you* because Esther speaks directly to you, the reader. Each reading contains a reflection question and practical suggestion. You'll get much more from this experience if you answer the questions and do the practical exercises. Don't skip them. Do them for the sake of your own soul.

Our study of Scripture is worshipful. Shame plagues us like a sickness that can't be shaken or like a dark, stormy cloud that follows us around. It's a painful experience. We can feel exposed, rejected, and dirty. We can feel like failures. Shame keeps us distant from others, especially those whose help we desperately need. Yet, for the believer, there is hope. Christ came for those who are filled with shame. The Holy One covers the naked, accepts the outcast, cleanses the unclean, and comforts those who have failed. We see the great Rescuer of our souls in God's Word, and he reorients our worship. Shame no longer takes center stage in our hearts. Christ does. We embrace God's Word because it points the ashamed to Christ as our one true sufficient foundation.

If you find this devotional helpful (and I trust that you will!), reread it in different seasons of your life. Work through it this coming month, then come back to it a year from now to remind yourself that ultimately you are known and loved by God in Christ.

If, after reading and rereading Esther's devotional, you want more gospel-rich resources to help you with your shame, she has listed several at the end of the book. Buy them and make good use of them.

Are you ready? Let's begin.

Deepak Reju

Introduction

THIS BOOK WAS almost not written.

That's probably a strange way to start a book, but it is true. And I make this confession because it is relevant here. This book was almost not written because of shame. It was almost not written because I, the author, felt disqualified to write it. I didn't feel gifted enough, wise enough, insightful enough, disciplined enough, skilled enough, spiritual enough. *Who do I think I am? I am a nobody. Why would anyone want to read what I write? I have nothing worthwhile to offer. Why waste everyone's time? Why even try?* On and on it went in my mind—the self-doubt, the self-condemnation, the persistent nagging voice that whispered in my ear and breathed down my neck, leaving me paralyzed and defeated.

This is a snapshot of shame. This is a snapshot of what many of us experience on a regular basis to varying degrees, even if we're not trying to write a book. We hear the self-doubting, self-loathing voice at work, in school, or at church. It emerges in social situations, in romantic relationships, and in our homes. It creeps into our consciousness when the busyness of our day slows down enough to leave us with our own thoughts.

It is the voice that says you're not enough because of the way you look—because of your weight, your build, or the color of your skin. It is the voice that says you're not enough because you are still single instead of married with kids. Because you've always been different from others, never fitting in.

It is the voice that says you're not enough because of the things you've done in your past. Because of the things you did and struggled with *today*. Because of the things other people have done *to* you—things that left you feeling dirty and worthless.

It is the voice that says you're not enough because rejection or failure is all you've known in life. Because you didn't come from the right kind of family. Because you failed to meet the expectations that others, including God, have placed on you—or the expectations that you placed on yourself. Because somewhere along the line you began to internalize the damaging words your parent spoke about you when you were a child. Or perhaps it was the *nothingness* you internalized: the experience of being invisible, unheard, neglected, treated with apathy, and overlooked—accumulated evidence that you don't matter.

It is the voice that says you're not enough because when you look at other people, they don't seem to struggle the way you do. Other people are put-together, happy, productive, successful, competent, sociable, popular, loved, sanctified, fruitful—and you are simply . . . not. So not only do you not feel good enough, but you feel *alone* in not being good enough. You have a sense of deficiency—a feeling that something is wrong with you, that you're the problem—and a sense of isolation.

Shame can be painful. It can be crippling. For some of us, it is life-consuming.

What are we to do with our shame? This devotional seeks to begin to answer this question. The operative word here is *begin*. We will not be completely free from the shackles of shame by the end of our thirty-one days together. We will not have it all figured out. Shame is complex and multifaceted. There are no simplistic or trite solutions and no quick fixes. Yet, as we dig into Scripture together, I hope you will see that there *are* answers, answers that matter, answers that I pray will make a meaningful difference in your life and set you on a different trajectory.

I write this devotional as a counselor at the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF) in Pennsylvania. I have been privileged to walk alongside many people who have entrusted their lives and burdens to me. Shame comes up often. Whether the presenting problem is depression, anxiety,

addiction, anger, relational challenges, singleness, OCD . . . shame is often close by. The reflections in this book are the fruit of those precious conversations over the years, the fruit of considering together what God has to say to shame-filled souls.

I also write this devotional as a fellow struggler. Shame has been one of the most stubborn struggles of my life. I am well acquainted with the voice of self-condemnation and the sting of rejection. I am acquainted with the anxious, desperate resolve to do better, to *be* better—and with what it feels like for my best to ultimately not be enough. I am acquainted with self-protection, hiding, and image management.

All this to say, I do not speak merely as one who has professionally helped others through shame. I also speak as someone who has been profoundly *helped* in my own struggle with shame—by a merciful and kind God and by loved ones who have reflected that mercy and kindness to me.

Before we begin, here are some orienting thoughts and suggestions for how you can use this devotional:

- *Please pace yourself.* The reflections may surface painful emotions and memories. Give yourself permission to take breaks, to go through a reflection every other day, once a week—whatever feels wisest and most manageable for you.
- *Consider inviting someone to pray for you*—or even to read the book with you. Shame is inherently isolating. It is no surprise that we often find grace and mercy in the context of safe and wise relationships.
- *Take opportunities to apply what you read*—to allow the material to soak into your heart and meaningfully (and slowly) rearrange your life. You may find it helpful to use a journal or start a computer document to jot down your thoughts.

When all is said and done, there is hope for our shame-filled souls. We are about to embark on a journey to discover that hope.

We will discover that it's not found in a set of principles or strategies, nor is it found in ourselves. We will find that our ultimate and lasting hope is in a Person. A Person who has determined that shame, unworthiness, and rejection will not have final say in our lives. A Person who was willing to do everything and sacrifice everything, even his very life, to make it so. Lord and Savior, please make it so.

OUR SHAME

Shame often lurks in the shadows. It can be easier to identify anxiety, depression, workaholism, anger, or addiction in our lives than to see the shame that often accompanies these experiences. We may struggle with perfectionism, burnout, hopelessness, escapism, self-harm . . . the list goes on—and overlook the underlying sense of unworthiness.

Shame thrives in darkness, so our first step in the journey toward hope is to identify and put words to it. When we better understand our shame, and grow in speaking about it to God and others, we begin to discover the light of life.

DAY 1

Beginning with the End

“Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. . . . He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” (Rev. 21:3–4)

DEAR BELIEVER, as we begin, please know this journey may be hard. I’ll be inviting you to think about things you would probably prefer not to think about. So I begin with the end to give you a glimpse of where we’re heading—so you know we won’t do this hard, messy work in vain.

Today’s passage describes a day when God will dwell with you. He will come near to tenderly wipe away every tear from your eyes. Mourning, crying, and pain will be no more. Shame will not have the final say in your life.

Imagine a day when there will be no more painful self-consciousness or envious comparing of yourself to others—you will be free to love and serve courageously. No more hamster wheel of trying to prove yourself—you will be wholly able to enjoy the Lord and experience his enjoyment of you. No more exclusion, isolation, and rejection—he will be with you forevermore. No more sins, failures, or regrets—the former things will pass away. No more self-loathing, dark secrets, or anxious striving. All that will remain will be joy, belonging, intimacy, light, goodness, radiance, beauty, rest, life.

This may sound too good to be true, and that’s okay. For now, even a glimmer of possibility is enough.

Have you ever watched an action movie where the tension ramps up so high that it feels hopeless? The enemy has the upper hand; the situation is bleak. Yet what happens if you watch the

movie having read the spoilers beforehand? You experience it differently. No matter what happens, no matter how many good people are killed, no matter how hopeless it seems, you know that good will prevail.

Today's passage is the spoiler for our lives. How our journey with shame ends isn't something that could go either way. God wins. Through Christ's death and resurrection, we win. Closeness, intimacy, light, and radiance win. We need that assurance. We need hope that despite the tangled knots of shame—despite what feels dark, irredeemable, and insoluble—good will prevail for us too. Even if we can't see it now. Even if we can't imagine how. Even if today it feels like the opposite is true. That is what today's passage holds out for us.

In counseling, the first session can be the hardest. Couselees come in and explain what led them to seek help. As they hear themselves speak, despair sinks in. "This is a lot. This is too much . . ."

"But you're here," I often say. "God led you to get help. He led you to this counseling room. Perhaps this is his way of letting you know he is pursuing you and already at work."

I wonder if the same is true here. You could be doing a million other things. But you're reading this devotional. Perhaps God is letting you know that he intends to bring about redemption in the broken, shameful pieces of your life.

There is hard work ahead. But knowing God is already at work, knowing what he is ultimately working toward, may we find an ounce of courage to enter in.

Reflect: Do you feel defeated or skeptical as you start this devotional? Hopeful? Scared to hope? How does today's reading affect you?

Act: Express how you are feeling to God. Ask him to meet you where you are. Write out a prayer if you'd like.

DAY 2

What Is Your Story?

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food . . . she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. (Gen. 3:6–7)

“I’M PROUD OF YOU.” Andrew had longed to hear these words from his father growing up, but nothing he did had ever seemed like enough. Though he was now a successful, well-respected businessman, no amount of achievement, affirmation, wealth, or status could erase his lingering sense of unworthiness.

“No godly man will ever want to marry me.” Hannah lost her virginity to a man she thought would be her future husband, but he betrayed and left her. Her self-loathing was all that remained.

Two stories of shame.

Here is another. A man and a woman were in a garden. All was well. Genesis 2:25 makes a point of saying they “were both naked and were not ashamed.” Yet we’re familiar with the story: a forbidden tree, a serpent’s deception. The fruit looked good; the woman ate it. The man ate it too. Suddenly they went from “naked and not ashamed” to covering themselves with fig leaves because they were very ashamed. The human tendency to cover ourselves up before others has been passed down for generations, all the way to us.

What can we learn about shame from these stories?

First, shame involves other people. Andrew longed for approval from his father. Hannah despaired that no godly man would ever want her. Shame led Adam and Eve to hide their bodies from each other and from God. Each of us have characters in our stories of shame.

Second, shame involves standards. Adam and Eve felt shame after they violated God's command not to eat from the forbidden tree. They had fallen short of his standards. Like Adam and Eve, Andrew, and Hannah, we too feel shame when we fail to meet certain standards—whether they be God's commands, the expectations of our parents or friends, or cultural norms. We use all kinds of standards as criteria to evaluate ourselves and our worth, and we experience shame when we fall short.

Here are some questions to consider:

- What is *your* story of shame?
- What particular life experiences brought you to this devotional?
- Whose opinions have really mattered to you in the past?
- Whose approval do you seek today, or whose disapproval do you fear?
- In what areas are you tempted to strive to prove yourself?
- What standards do you fail to meet?

I invite you to name specifics, because God intends for this journey to be personal. He speaks to *you*—to *your* story. He knows the particular people and standards that have made your shame so sticky. His mercies meet you in your specific insecurities and heartaches. He promises to help. As you begin to identify the particulars of your shame story, would you speak to him and invite his help?

Reflect: Choose one question to answer from the bulleted list above. Refrain from making moral evaluations of right or wrong—your only goal for now is to identify more particulars.

Act: Write down two to three standards to which you often hold yourself but that you fail to meet. As you think of additional ones in the coming days, you can add to your list.

DAY 3

“I Must Hide”

The man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” (Gen. 3:8–10)

WHEN WE LOOK for shame, we look for areas in our lives where we are tempted to conceal, to cover up, to pretend:

- An eleven-year-old boy schemes of ways to hide his school grades from his parents, dreading their disappointment.
- A victim of childhood sexual abuse avoids disclosing her past to her friends, afraid they will be disgusted by her “baggage.”
- A man learns to bottle up his emotions, having been taught from a young age that boys don’t cry and emotions are a sign of weakness.
- A woman chooses clothes that will conceal the extra pounds she has gained.
- A married couple smiles brightly at church on Sundays and on social media, pretending everything is okay when their lives are falling apart behind closed doors.

Many of us pretend we are more okay than we are. We present to others only what we want them to see. Why? Because we fear that people will discover the ugly and unlovable parts of us and then reject us. We struggle alone because we are not ready to bear the risks of confession, disclosure, and honesty. Shame complicates and erodes our relationships—including our relationship

with God. Hence Adam's words: "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid."

Tim Keller wrote, "To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved . . . is what we need more than anything."¹

The reality is that relationships are hard and messy. They can be marked by anxiety. Many of us have settled for "comforting but superficial" in our relationships. Yet Keller's quote points us to a richer possibility: maybe vulnerability and intimacy can feel safe and life-giving again, as they did for Adam and Eve before they sinned. Maybe we can find a way out of all the hiding—a way we can taste the joy of being fully known and truly loved.

"You're the first person I've ever told . . ." When a counselee says this to me, it doesn't matter what confession follows. I know that moment is Spirit-wrought victory: a glorious movement from darkness to light, from isolation to community, from secrecy and hiding to freedom and new life. It is heroic and admirable—a glimpse of what God intends our lives and relationships to be. We will see later in the devotional how God brings this intention to fruition in Jesus Christ.

Reflect: What do you tend to hide from others? What parts of your story or facets of your personality do you wish to remain unknown? What are some present-day struggles you have a hard time sharing with others?

Act: Consider what hiding strategies you use in your relationships. Do you lie or exaggerate? Avoid disclosing emotions and struggles? Write down one or two ways you tend to hide, cover up, or pretend.