

WILL YOU UNDRRESS BEFORE GOD?

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That may seem like a strange question, but dressing is an ancient custom invented by two humans, Adam and Eve, who were afraid to meet God the way He made them, naked. Why? Because they had disobeyed Him, and were imagining that fig-leaf camouflage could cover up the shame of their guilt. But humans can't hide from their Creator. Our frightened ancestors tried. We can try, too, and even get away with it for a while, but not forever.

The older I get, the more meaningful the first three chapters in Genesis become to me. They contain themes of truth that keep unfolding more and more clearly throughout God's progressive revelation in the Bible. The *bad news* revealed there is that our first parents set themselves and us, their descendants, on a confusing and disastrous course of moral separation from our Maker. They ate a fruit that brought into humanity the independent *knowledge of good and evil*, a knowledge of right and wrong apart from a direct relationship with the Source of Truth, God Himself. Losing that relationship led to the moral conflict and social chaos that fill the pages of human history. Independence and separation from God resulted in spiritual death, and ultimately, physical death, for "*man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.*" Our subsequent exile from Eden's paradise cut us off from another tree that grew there, the tree of everlasting life. Our fresh, new world, originally so human-friendly and full of promise, immediately began to reverberate with the death and decay that the first humans had brought into it. Because we were made from its cosmic dust, and divinely commissioned to govern and take care of it, humanity and the rest of creation had a common destiny. The damaging ruin that began with us overflowed into the rest of the created order, over which God had made us responsible. That's the *bad news* in the story, and it's still the *bad news* today.

But the *good news* is that God did not scrap the human project. Although we ran and hid from Him, God came after us. "*Where are you?*" was His first question to Adam and the same one He asks modern man. It was not intended for gathering information, but a rhetorical question, meant to make us reflect on where a life disconnected from our Maker has taken us. And His second question is even more instructive about how we are misled by listening to and following religious voices that are not human-friendly: "*Who told you that you were naked?*" God wants us to realize that human beings have a dangerous enemy, Satan, who is a liar. Before he deceived Adam and Eve, *nakedness* had no meaning to them. The uncovered openness of everything in nature was the only reality, for themselves and for all the rest of the creation. The human concept of being "naked" came into existence only after the very first perception of a need for "hiding" or "covering up" was established in the human heart. God, by His second question, was pointing out the liar who had introduced Adam and Eve into that perception. *Hiding* and *covering up* were identifying traits in Satan's character. He both practiced and promoted them. We may hate to admit this, but lies and clothing have a similar action. Both of them hide or cover up the truth, and having done so, they provide a fertile environment for "vain imagination" and its destructive social fruit.

Before being duped, Adam and Eve saw God's world of reality as it really was. When they accepted Satan's deceitful offer to help them get their "eyes open," he literally "pulled the wool over their eyes." They entered the realm of moral independence from God, a world of pretending, a world of feigned appearances, a make-believe world. This is where Satan himself lived and reigned. Taking on this diabolical pattern of seeing things differently than how God

sees them, Adam and Eve decided that hiding their true selves was now a "good" idea. They immediately tried to do this by concealing the bodies God had given them. But physical nudity was not their problem. In fact, it was symbolic of God's solution to their problem. Their *external* nakedness, as well as that of all the rest of creation, had been pronounced "very good" by their Creator. It was actually their *internal* shame, the reflexive shame of their guilty conscience, that they were attempting to cover up, first with their own leafy needlework, then by hiding among trees, and finally by making up excuses. Instead of abandoning them to their self-deception, God sought them out. His discerning interrogation (carried out for their benefit, not His own) quickly cut through all those man-contrived cover-ups of the truth. God still wanted fellowship with humanity, but their own works, the fig-leaf outfits based on their morally independent thinking, had to go. With those stripped away, they stood before their Maker once again naked. Then God, their Creator revealed Himself as their Preserver. The removal of their own work prepared them for His divine work, which would partially and temporarily preserve their lives in the midst of their spiritual plight. He was about to cover them in another manner and with an entirely different purpose, for which their man-made clothing was useless.

God had told Adam and Eve previously that, if ever they ate from the forbidden fruit, on that very day they would die. But in His loving grace, He allowed their death penalty to fall elsewhere. In their place, God spilled the life-blood of innocent animals, taking their skins to make clothing to *cover up* the guilty couple of Eden. This shedding of blood was the first "*making of atonement*," a Hebrew term (*kaphar*) that literally means "*to cover*" sacrificially. They were guilty and under a death sentence, but those innocent creatures died for them. The leather garments resulting from these sacrificial deaths were not meant to conceal their nakedness from each other, but *to cover* their moral guilt in the presence of a holy God. They were now sacrificially *covered*, not under their own guilt-tainted works, or under clever rationalizations and excuses, but under the innocence of the animals whose blood was shed to *atone* for them. This same pattern of bloody sacrifice for *atonement* was later ritualized as part of Old Testament law under Moses, and it pointed to a Final Sacrifice that would not *cover over* sins, but *take them away* completely. That predicted Sacrifice was identified by the last Old Testament prophet, John the Baptist, who said, when baptizing Jesus, "*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*"

Animal sacrifices only *covered over* human sins. That's all an *atonement* could possibly do. The only way for sins to be *taken away* entirely was through the sacrificial work of a human who was without sin, perfectly innocent. Adam and Eve passed on to their descendants their own natural bent for moral independence from God, which always resulted in moral failure. Since all humans sinned, an ideal human sacrifice was a natural impossibility. But the God who sought out the first sinners and covered them by atonement, was the kind of God who would do whatever it took to complete the restoration of humankind and the created order. The incredibly awesome thing God did was to become one of us, a true human, the man called Jesus Christ. That divine act of humanly incarnating Himself separates the Christian faith from all other religions. Nothing comes close to it. He did not just appear as a human, but became so truly human that He could actually die. In fact, that was the express purpose of the Incarnation: to become one of us, so that He could die in our place. This is exactly what He did on the Cross of Calvary outside Jerusalem, almost 2000 years ago. God, the Maker of this physical universe, personally stepped down into His very own handiwork in order to rectify what went wrong in the human project—just pause and try to take that in for a moment. You can't really do it, because it will take all eternity for our human minds to fully comprehend such a loving act by our Creator. Yet that unspeakable

mystery is the foundation of all Christian praise and worship.

Jesus Christ provided, through His death on Calvary's wooden Cross, much more than forgiveness for our sins. Left behind in Eden was a "tree of life" whose fruit, when eaten, enabled the partaker to live forever. The Tree of Calvary gave us a better food, the very life of God Himself, offered through Christ's body and blood. Jesus said in John 6:54-55 (NIV), "*Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink.*" God's work through the Cross brought to an end the need for *covering* by bloody animals skins and ritual sacrifices, for these were only temporary and provisional. Christ's Cross was permanent and thoroughly complete, as described by Hebrews 10:10-12,14 (NRSV): "*And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, 'he sat down at the right hand of God,' . . . For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.*" We can now be clothed in Jesus Christ Himself and in the righteousness He provided for us by His work on the Cross. He drew to Himself all humanity, past, present and future, by being lifted up on that Cross (John 12:32). The race of the old Adam was being brought to an end, so that the race of the New Adam might be born. That is why Paul the Apostle said in Galatians 2:20 (NKJV), "*I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.*"

The distinctive feature of the original disaster in the Garden of Eden was death. God through His Incarnation in Christ intentionally subjected Himself to death, so that He might defeat it. He conquered death by entering the grave and breaking out of it through His Resurrection. It was a human Resurrection, the prototype of the future, full-scale resurrection of all humanity that will occur when He comes back to finalize His reign on Earth. This is the Christian's hope, but also the silent anticipation of all creation as it waits for His return to undo the ancient curse and complete the creational restoration promised by God. "*For all creation is waiting patiently and hopefully for that future day,*" it says in the *Living Bible's* paraphrase of Rom 8:19-23, "*when God will resurrect his children. For on that day thorns and thistles, sin, death, and decay—the things that overcame the world against its will at God's command—will all disappear, and the world around us will share in the glorious freedom from sin which God's children enjoy. For we know that even the things of nature, like animals and plants, suffer in sickness and death as they await this great event. And even we Christians, although we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, also groan to be released from pain and suffering. We, too, wait anxiously for that day when God will give us our full rights as his children, including the new bodies he has promised us—bodies that will never be sick again and will never die.*"

After His Resurrection and Ascension, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to dwell within believers as a Companion, until He would physically come back Himself. The Spirit not only mediates the presence of Christ spiritually within believers, but He empowers them for holy living and encourages them to bear witness to their faith.

The Holy Spirit also works within the world in general to shine the light of Christ into the hearts of those who do not yet believe, those who are hiding or running for cover from His light. In other words, God is still in the business of searching out sinners. Despite our wayward wills and willful ways, God's love still pursues us, as it did the first humans after they sinned. All our fig-leaf efforts or elaborately woven figments of our rationalization melt away before His

penetrating gaze. Again, as in the beginning, we stand before Him stripped bare. We become absolutely naked under the probing searchlight of His Truth. Hebrews 4:12-13 (NKJV) puts it this way: *"For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account."* While that "sword of the Spirit" is sheathed, we may stray aimlessly through life following our own personal standards of right and wrong, as humans have been doing since our Fall in the Garden of Eden. But when God draws out the gleaming blade of His Word, it becomes the Naked Truth, dressed up in nothing and totally undressing whomever it pierces. It has the power to strip off any cover-ups we use in trying to insulate ourselves from God. His intention is not to shame us. Just the opposite. He wants to strip us bare to heal us of shame, by setting us free from the self-deceiving lies that bind up our souls. He wants us fully naked, so that He can thoroughly wash us clean from the sins that bring shame into our lives.

There is an ancient ritual of Jewish washing called the *mikveh*, that required converts to be immersed totally nude in a flowing body of water, such as a river. It symbolized the naked innocence of Adam and Eve before they sinned. At the Jordan River, where Jesus was baptized, John the Baptist most likely used this already familiar *mikveh* ritual. This seems evident from the fact that the early church itself continued using this form of baptism for the next few centuries. But John gave a new meaning to that naked immersion. It became a demonstration of repentance. It meant coming out fully, in front of God and everybody, personally acknowledging sin and publicly demonstrating a turning away from it with a full-body bath. Repentance means just that, a fresh, newly-washed start in life. After Christ rose from death, His Cross and Resurrection gave even deeper meanings to the nude baptism. As one early church father, Cyril of Jerusalem, wrote, *"As soon as ye came into the inner part of the baptistry, ye put off your clothes, which is an emblem of putting off the old man with his deeds; and being thus divested, ye stood naked, imitating Christ, that was naked upon the cross, who by his nakedness spoiled principalities and powers, publicly triumphing over them in the cross."* That last metaphor in the quote points to another meaning in the early practice of nude baptism. In Scriptural terms, it is perhaps the most powerful one. It connects a nude believer's baptism with Christ's dying naked on the Cross, His burial, then His rising up with all the grave cloths used to wrap His naked body left behind in the tomb. Many believe Mary Magdalene met him that way, mistaking Him for a gardener, since servants, gardeners, even fishermen like Peter, often worked in the nude in those days. *"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart,"* is Job's bottom-line description of "the human condition." Christ's crucifixion, burial and resurrection redeemed that condition in full identification with all humans who are universally stripped naked by death. The ancient nude baptism unmistakably associated a new believer with the One who accomplished that redemption. Christian baptism rituals today still demonstrate the believer's spiritual connection with Christ, even though the richness of the earlier metaphor has sadly been abandoned and forgotten.

Unlike Bible times and the days of the early church, we don't see our friends and neighbors bathing themselves down at the local rivers. We don't see naked preachers, like the prophet Isaiah carrying on a three-year stint of nude ministry (Isaiah 20:2,3). If we do "foot washing" in church, we don't strip off all our clothes like a slave, as Jesus did, using the towel wrapped around Him not to hide His skin, but to dry feet (John 13:3-5). Those days are over. Nude baptisms are no longer in style, except perhaps in some distant aboriginal cultures. Instead,

our culture today, with its prudish and pornographic mindset, regards nudity almost exclusively in terms of sexuality and lust. In social terms, our porno-prudery is an area where we badly need God's healing work to restore us to wholesome thinking about the body. But in spiritual terms, God is still searching for us in our fig-leaf attitudes, trying to get us absolutely naked beneath the light of His Word. He is still looking for the real *us* beneath all that we dress ourselves up in. He will have us starkly exposed before Him, stripped bare of all our flimsy fig-leaf reasoning, excuses, and rationalizations. We must take off our reputation, our status, our good deeds, our achievements, anything we trust in for making a fine appearance. Everything must come off, be dropped in a pile and kicked away by a bare foot. He wants us, just us. He will not save or sanctify the external shields and barriers we've used to prevent His Gospel light from penetrating the very depths of our beings. His work of purification and restoration must cleanse the soul, because that's where He can wash us, deliver us, heal us, renew us, and make us whole again.

Will you undress before your Maker? Will you have the courage to get naked for the cleansing baptismal bath He alone can give you? You need Him to wash you personally, but He will do it only if you undress from those things by which you've been hiding yourself from Him. Then you can step out of your own works and be clothed in the work He accomplished on the Cross. As one old hymn says, we need to be "dressed in His righteousness alone, faultless to stand before the throne." Only in this way can you be covered with God's salvation. In this way alone can you experience forgiveness, restoration, and healing. But it must be a way you purposefully choose. God help you to make that choice!

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