

## INTRODUCTION

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Tattoos do more than decorate the body—they mark identity. For years, Wayne Stokes used ink to project a hardened image, covering his skin with words and symbols of pain. But eventually, those marks no longer reflected who he was. At great cost and greater pain, he began the long process of tattoo removal. As *Washington Post* journalist Emily Wills observes, tattoo removal is often an act of regret and confession—a desire to erase what once felt permanent and to reclaim a self that feels lost. For people like Stokes, the pain is worth it, because each session brings relief and the hope of finally seeing themselves again.

That longing points to something deeper. Not all regret is visible, but some sins leave a lasting sense of contamination—an inner stain that cannot be erased by external means. Just as lasers can only reach the skin, human solutions can only address surface-level guilt. What we need is a deeper cleansing, one that reaches the soul itself. This is where expiation comes in: God’s provision not merely to forgive sin, but to remove its defiling power, cleansing us from the inside out and restoring us to wholeness.

- Are there things in your life you wish you could get rid of? Do you know others who struggle with feeling permanently “marked” by sin?
- What are some ways that people try to hide their stains from others? Why is it not enough to cover up the past but eliminate it altogether?

*“Why do I feel so dirty?”*

**JESUS IS MY EXPIATION**

## SIN AS POLLUTION

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King David may never have worn tattoos, but he understood deep regret and moral contamination. Psalm 51 records his anguished confession after his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, crimes that multiplied through deception and abuse of power. When the prophet Nathan finally confronted him, David's shame erupted in a plea not just for forgiveness, but for cleansing. His language—"blot out," "wash," "cleanse"—reveals that he experienced sin as something defiling, not merely something to feel guilty about. David's prayer shows that true repentance longs for more than pardon; it cries out to be made clean.

- Read Psalm 51:1-4. Why does David ask that God "blot out" or "wash away" his sins?
- Why does David say that "against you and you only have I sinned." Does that mean his sin didn't impact the lives of others? Explain.
- Why do certain kinds of sin leave us feeling "dirty?" What might our feelings of moral disgust indicate about the nature of sin?

- Sexual sin can be particularly isolating. What might David's response to his own sin indicate about the way we respond to our sexual sin?
- "It's just sex," a friend or relative tells you. How might you explain to them that human sexuality is powerful, and that sexual sin can leave a mark?

## JESUS IS MY EXPIATION

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The concept of expiation is central to Scripture, and the Day of Atonement vividly illustrates it. On this day, Israel's high priest performed rituals to purify the nation from their sins and uncleanness. One goat was sacrificed in the usual manner, its blood applied to the altar to cleanse and consecrate it, symbolically removing the people's sin. The second goat, known as the scapegoat, was treated differently: it carried the people's guilt and shame into the wilderness. To ensure it never returned, a chain of volunteers would pass the goat along, ultimately sending it over a cliff.

Though not explicitly recorded in Scripture, tradition holds that the ritual involved tying two strings—dipped in the blood of the first goat—one to a post in the camp and one to the scapegoat. When the scapegoat went over the cliff, the string in the camp would turn from blood-red to white, symbolizing that the sins of Israel had been fully erased. This ritual, repeated year after year, illustrates the deep biblical theme of expiation: sin is not merely punished or hidden,

but truly removed, and the people are made ceremonially and morally clean.

- In your own words, define expiation. Why might it bring joy to be washed clean of sin—especially sexual sin?
- Read 1 John 1:7-9. Explain how the cross renders us clean. What might this passage indicate about how we battle ongoing sin and shame?
- Read 1 Corinthians 6:9-11. What does Paul say happens when a person comes to Jesus? How might that help us deal with past sin and brokenness?

Jesus' death on the cross is the ultimate fulfillment of the sacrificial system, the final means of expiation that cleanses all sin. David's longing for forgiveness finds its answer in Calvary, where Christ's wounds accomplish what the sacrificial system only foreshadowed. As Paul tells Titus, salvation comes not through human works but through God's mercy, "by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5), and John emphasizes that Jesus' blood cleanses all sin for those who walk in the light and confess their sins (1 John 1:7, 9). Throughout his ministry, Jesus repeatedly

crossed purity boundaries, touching lepers, healing the woman with a flow of blood, and raising the dead—acts that would have rendered anyone ceremonially unclean under Jewish law—yet in him, the unclean became clean. On the cross, he bore the ultimate uncleanness, taking on the weight of human sin so that, as Isaiah predicted, the "griefs and sorrows" of humanity might be transferred to him, and through his blood, cleansing and life would be granted to all who believe.

- Read Psalm 51:5-9 in light of the finished work of the cross. What emotions does David feel at the prospect of being made clean? What might that suggest about what we experience when we repent of our sin?

## LIVING CLEAN

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Every single person in this world will be indelibly marked by one of two things: the things that you do, the things that others have done to you, or what Christ has done for you. Once you realize this, everything changes. The cross sets you free from a lifetime of detergent and lye, hoping against hope that you can scrub away the filth of your own impurity. If Jesus is my expiation, then I can be set free—wonderfully, finally free—from my shame.

- Pause and consider how the doctrine of expiation might impact those struggling with their past sexual sin. What counsel might you offer them?

- Read Zechariah 3:1-4. What is happening in this passage? How might this be a perfect image of how Christ transforms us from dirty to pure?
  
- What about those who have been wounded by the sexual sin of others? How might expiation impact those individuals?

- If Jesus is my expiation, then my sins don't mark me as dirty or unclean. Instead, I can live in my new status as forgiven and whole.
- If Jesus is my expiation, then I am not damaged goods, but a washed and sanctified child of God.
- If Jesus is my expiation, then ongoing purity is the only way to live consistently with my new status.
- If Jesus is my expiation, then I trust in him to remove my dirt and shame rather than trying to cover it on my own.
- If Jesus is my expiation, then I can be confident that I can approach God wearing the white robes of his purity, not my own.

### PRAYER

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*Heavenly Father, I come before You acknowledging the weight of my sin, the stains that cling to my heart and mind, and the shame that leaves me feeling unclean. Thank You for sending Jesus, whose life, death, and resurrection fully accomplish expiation, washing me from all my iniquities and making me whiter than snow. Lord, purge me from within, cleanse me from every hidden impurity, and restore in me a clean heart and a willing spirit. Let Your mercy overshadow my guilt, and may Your Spirit renew me daily, so that I can walk free from shame, live in Your light, and rejoice in the joy of salvation. In Jesus' holy and precious name, Amen.*