

Treasured

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*Knowing God
by the Things
He Keeps*

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McLennan*

Praise for *Treasured*

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Campus Crusade for Christ, and cofounder
of Synergy Women’s Network

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*Knowing God
by the Things
He Keeps*

Leigh McLeroy



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In loving memory of:

Alice Elizabeth Nixon Smith

Willis Bryant Smith

Frances Winona Hawthorne McLeroy

Walter Buford McLeroy Sr.

(I knew them as Memaw, Pepaw, Grand Nona, and Daddy Mac.)



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INTRODUCTION

My Grandfather's Box

Memories by Mail

A battered cardboard box arrived by mail a few weeks after my grandfather's death, postmarked from the small West Texas town where he lived most of his years, the town where a crumbling cemetery now cradled his remains.

Inside the box, suspended in weightless drifts of white Styrofoam, a smaller, more pungent box was buried. An old cigar box.

Like young Jem Finch of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I lifted the lid of my newly arrived treasure chest in private. But instead of carved soap figures, marbles, and other childhood collectibles, I saw a handwritten note: "Here are some of Pepaw's things." Then, in an obvious afterthought: "He kept these."

The well-meaning aunt who sent this shipment must have intended to place some final mark of punctuation on my grandfather's interrupted ninth decade, but for his youngest daughter's

youngest daughter, the box formed not a period but a colon. *Meet your grandfather*, it seemed to say. *Maybe you didn't know him so well after all.*

If I had expected some sort of inventoried order, I would have been disappointed. It looked as if Willis Smith had simply emptied his pockets on his last day, filling the cigar box with the contents of his neatly creased khakis, as if to say, *There you go. That 'bout does it.*

I lowered my face and inhaled deeply, breathing in the last, elusive fragrance of a man I had adored. Nothing in the box could have been worth more than a few dollars, and there was not a single keepsake that might be considered suitable for display. But every small scrap it contained told a story—his story.

A stiff-bristled shaving brush sported a worn wooden handle with lettering that had long ago faded into hieroglyphics. I held it with thumb and forefinger and stroked it down my jawbone from cheek to chin. It still smelled faintly sweet. Willis's face was always clean-shaven and splashed liberally with Old Spice. He was an outdoor man who cleaned up well and wore his hat to town.

Near the brush was a polished nickel lighter—its top hinged back with a click, releasing the tinny aroma of lighter fluid. I tried to ignite a flame, brushing the striker wheel smartly with my thumb, but there was no juice left, not even the tiniest glimmer of a spark.

Next, I fingered a small leather coin purse with a doll-sized zip-

per. It contained a little more than a dollar in loose change. Cradling the coins in my palm, I imagined my grandfather standing with them at the cash register in Keel Drug Store and buying...what? A roll of butterscotch disks? A package of Swisher Sweets? I wasn't sure. But at Keel's they would know, because nearly every day for at least twenty-five years, he had ambled in there for a sandwich, a prescription, or a few minutes of friendly speculation about the size of the current maize crop, or the weather, or both.

His battered brown wallet with a single fold contained no driver's license (failing eyesight meant he hadn't driven legally for years), but it yielded up a Social Security card that looked newer than my own, along with a Medicare ID and a printed business card—mine, from my first job out of college. He hadn't said a word when I shyly handed it to him, but he apparently deemed it important enough to keep. I remembered him introducing me once to a crony of his with this preamble: "This is my daughter Muriel's youngest girl. She's an old maid." I was twenty-one at the time. But maybe he hadn't been so disappointed in me after all.

Next to the wallet were two identical, palm-sized Bible promise books filled with predictable but encouraging words from the King James Version: "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want" (Psalm 23:1). And, "That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). I had never once seen Willis read the Bible, never gone with him to church. I imagined the tiny books propped up on his meal tray at the nursing home,

maybe as a special gift to residents on Easter or Christmas. Did he finally help himself to the great “whosoever” invitation of God?

I never knew for certain. One day I will.

Two matching cuff links and a tie tack told me that my grandfather had dressed at least once for something more formal than an afternoon at the domino hall, although I couldn't imagine what. A court date? A friend's funeral? At my high-school graduation he wore a neatly pressed dress shirt with the top button buttoned...but no tie. That was as gussied up as I had ever seen him.

Last, I fingered a single key ring with two keys. To what? What did he open in the end that he might have locked? He'd experienced the indignity of aging, the sort of dependency that invites access. After a while everyone comes in, and hardly anyone knocks. Independence becomes a distant memory, privacy a mirage. But to his dying day my grandfather apparently carried keys...even if they hadn't opened anything in years.

As I held the contents of that box in my lap, I felt grateful, and powerfully connected—not just to the Willis I knew, but to the life that was his before I was born, and to the angles and edges of him that I had never seen with my own eyes. He came alive for me through the contents of one small box in a way he never had before, with his mystery, his sweetness, and his scars. Now he would exist for me not in flesh and bone but through the tangible scraps of memory he left behind, things that painted for me a fresh, new picture of the man.

I've known God longer than I ever knew my grandfather, although I have never seen Him. I've not once touched His face or heard His voice or felt the weight of His hand on my own. Still, I suspect that He has left more than a few scattered bits of His rich and mysterious identity for me to examine, tucked away deep in the pages of His Word. An olive branch here. A golden bell there. A faded strip of fabric, spotted brown with blood. A length of scarlet thread. A few grains of barley. These keepsakes tell His story, and they help me to understand my own.

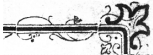

He treasured them, and He treasures me too.

A Fig Leaf

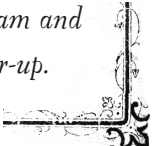
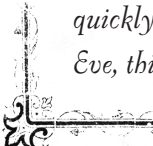
The God Who Covers Me

When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings.

—GENESIS 3:6–7



The leaf is very nearly palm sized, a broad, trefoil shape—and a kind of rough fuzz covers both its top and its underside. It doesn't seem a texture that would rest comfortably next to human skin. However, it is easily plucked from the fig tree's branches, and fairly sturdy, I suppose, for garden wear. When trying to cover up quickly, we reach for what is closest, so for Adam and Eve, this must have been a most convenient cover-up.



I heard her before I saw her: a hoarse, loud woman who barked awful obscenities at no one in particular. On a bench near New York's old Plaza Hotel, a friend and I had paused to fortify ourselves with coffee and street-vendor bagels before more sightseeing. As our eyes scanned in the direction of the voice, we spied its source: a disheveled, clearly agitated woman carrying an odd assortment of plastic bags and a battered cane. She now veered in our direction.

"Look down," my friend instructed quietly. "Don't look at her."

I was twenty-three years old. It was my first trip to the city. I couldn't help but look at her. I'd never seen a sight quite like her before. Then the randomly screeching woman aimed her moving tirade like a laser...at the two of us.

"Look at yourselves," she screamed, coming closer. "Just look at yourselves. You make me sick. You make me sick. Shame! Shame!"

She came so close that I finally did look down, but only to avoid being hit by the spittle flying from her mouth as she berated us.

"You should be ashamed," she barked. "You make me sick!" Then, as abruptly as she had zeroed in on us, she began moving across the small park area in the direction of a retreating homeless man not twenty yards away.

I looked at my friend wide-eyed, unsure whether to laugh or cry. As bizarre as the experience had been, the woman who verbally accosted us that chilly day in Manhattan was not saying anything I hadn't heard before...from deep within my own heart. My inner critic isn't dramatically loud and doesn't spit, but she can be just

as condemning, and her out-of-the-blue rants equally mean and focused. *And you call yourself a Christian*, she rails, or, *They just invited you to be polite*, or, *Shut up before you embarrass yourself. Everyone can tell you don't know what you're talking about.*

Sometimes when I look at myself, I get upset at what I see and am more than a little ashamed. I know my own shortcomings better than anyone. I can point them out almost without thinking, like a tour guide who's frequented the same spots for so long she doesn't even have to engage her brain to rattle off the particulars. "Yes, over here we have stubborn pride... It's been here since the beginning. And over here is envy, and over there greed. We may see some sloth today if the weather's nice...and perhaps a bit of gluttony too."

It doesn't take an unfortunate woman off her meds to convince me I've got issues. I know that I do. Parts of me are just as sick and shame filled as she insisted that day, only my infirmities are better hidden than her own.

G. K. Chesterton once said that original sin was the one Christian doctrine he could not challenge, for he had personal, empirical evidence of its veracity.¹



Once upon a brief but beautiful sliver of time, shame did not exist. It simply wasn't. In the ancient, God-planted garden we know as Eden, the first man and the first woman lived without it. Adam and Eve really were made for each other, and never would there be

a more promising beginning than theirs. It was just the two of them, ensconced in a lush paradise where “the LORD God caused to grow every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2:9).

In this paradise, two totally unique but perfectly interdependent persons lived as one flesh. “And the man and his wife were both naked,” the story goes, “and were not ashamed” (2:25). Adam felt no drawing back from Eve. All of him was open, visible, and knowable to her. And all of her to him. No inner sentry warned them to protect themselves from each other or even hinted that they were vulnerable to hurt. They each had a baby’s innocence, having never been babies at all.

There was work to be done in Eden. Cultivating and keeping work. Tending work. Stewardship. And there were rules. To Adam, the Lord God commanded: “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die” (2:16–17). He gave Adam this instruction even before He gave him Eve. But it wasn’t long before things went badly awry.

“Now the serpent,” we are told, “was more crafty than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, ‘Indeed, has God said, “You shall not eat from any tree of the garden”?’ The woman said to the serpent, ‘From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree

which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, “You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die”” (3:1–3).

In Eve’s own words, the serpent quickly recognized his in. She had identified something that God said was off-limits to her. He could convince her that God’s commands concerning the tree in the center of the garden were grossly unfair, that her Creator really did not have her best interests at heart—but meant to withhold from her something very good. He could fool her into believing that God’s prescribed limits kept her from true fulfillment. (In all this time his story has not changed one iota.) He further disputed that God’s predicted consequences were true: “You surely will not die!” he told her. “For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (3:4–5).

But too much of the wrong kind of enlightenment is never a good thing.

Convinced of the forbidden tree’s desirability (and of God’s aloofness toward her now-clamoring wants), Eve ate. And she invited Adam to join her. He may or may not have been privy to the serpent’s wooing of Eve, but he had surely heard firsthand God’s command to abstain. He ate anyway, with cosmic repercussions: “Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings” (3:7).

The new knowing that Adam and Eve’s disobedience brought

to them was no comfort, but instead a curse. For the first time, they saw before them not God's beauty but their own flawed hearts. They felt guilty as a result of their sin, and that guilt made them want to hide—from God and from each other. So they took fig leaves (scratchy, broad, trefoil-shaped patches) and sewed them together to cover themselves as best they could. But even covered, they still felt shame.

The promised damage of sin had begun.



“Shame,” says John Piper, “is the painful emotion caused by a consciousness of guilt or shortcoming or impropriety.”²

Some shame is justified or well placed; some is not. But once sin comes into the picture, shame is sure to follow. We come to understand why God says no most clearly when we have disobeyed Him and begin to feel the weight of the consequences our actions bring. Sooner or later, with sin comes shame. They are close companions. One rarely shows up without the other. One invites the other to the party: Shame...and guest. Sin...and guest. Shame just may be the most debilitating chronic disease known to man. It makes us heart-sick at the sight of ourselves. It makes us want to cover our shortcomings from other people's sight. And it puts distance between us and those we would love—and those who would love us.

Shame is like a lumbering dog that creeps uninvited into bed and insinuates itself between bedmates, then proceeds to claim the

space between them as no man's land so that they can never touch, never hold each other, never speak without reaching over or past something big and rank and formidable.

I know this dog better than I wish I did.



I think I might have grown up wanting to hide. I can remember routinely making a tent of my bedcovers with a twirling baton for a center pole and crawling underneath it for cover. I played there with my dolls and storybooks. I liked it under the tent. About the same time—when I was a first grader—I was unwillingly segregated from the rest of the classroom for hours at a time when my teacher discovered I could read. I had learned easily alongside my older sister two years earlier. When she brought home beginner books, I watched over her shoulder as she sounded out the words. Soon I was poring over them alone, piecing the stories together as she did and loving every minute of it. But a reader in a classroom of nonreaders was an inconvenience for my teacher, and so she dragged my desk over to a corner and piled a stack of library books nearby to keep me occupied. I must have mentioned to my parents that I was sad being alone so much of the day, which necessitated a rather uncomfortable parent-teacher conference. My mother told me years later that my dad nearly leaped over the principal's desk and grabbed him by the throat when he informed my parents that

“no first grader should be that d—— smart.” I didn’t feel like an overachiever, though; I felt like a freak.

I was in third grade when another teacher discovered that I could write poetry (once a word nerd, always a word nerd) and horrified me by filling a glass trophy case in front of the main office with huge copies of poems I’d done for class, illustrated on poster board for all the school to see. If I could have carried my homemade tent with me as a portable hiding place after that, I believe I would have. The coolest kids in class were fast runners on the playground or social magnets for clusters of other kids at the lunch table; I was the trophy-case poet. I felt even odder than I probably was.

No one had to teach me to be ashamed of being different. It came naturally. I didn’t trust anyone to “get” me, and I wasn’t exactly brimming with confidence over whatever early talent I might have demonstrated. Like any other kid, I just wanted to fit in. At home I knew I was loved, but open, easy praise wasn’t often offered or encouraged.

Once, a favorite aunt was brushing my long, thick ponytail while we sat in her living room watching the Miss America Pageant. “You’re so pretty,” she told me as she pulled the brush through my hair. “You’re prettier than all those girls there on the television.” I felt my heart open wide. I wanted so much to believe her that for a brief moment I did. My mother overheard her compliment, though, and—I’m sure to make certain her already slightly precocious preteen

daughter didn't get bigheaded—quickly corrected her: “No, she's not. Don't tell her that.”

I wanted to sink into the sofa cushions for my half second of willing belief. Of course it wasn't true. I was ashamed that I had thought it might be. I wasn't even ten, and I was already toting around loads of misplaced shame. Score one for Satan, with an easy assist from my ancestor Eve.

When Adam and Eve realized their physical and emotional nakedness, their misplaced shame bound them too. Their natural trust in each other gave way to suspicion. They interacted carefully instead of with carefree ease. The pure, intimate bond between them became shadowed by cautious restraint. Since their fall, self-protection, not transparency, has been our human bent.

When I got a little older, I experienced well-placed shame. My own moral compass let me know when I was out of bounds, and it routinely set off shame alarms. As with Adam and Eve, I'd had the rules for right living clearly articulated to me. I knew my parents' expectations. And I knew when I had defied and disappointed them.

Unfounded or well placed, this remnant of shame has been consistently present all my life—as either a low-grade feeling of unease or a sharp sense of remorse, regret, and longing for cover. I still grapple with it. Like Adam and Eve, I try to close the gap between what *is* and what *ought to be* by covering what *is*. But my covering is never quite adequate. It keeps slipping off at the most unexpected times.



My task was simple: pick up the morning paper and a carton of juice. *Easy in, easy out.* Five minutes max. I strode with purpose into my neighborhood grocery store, grabbed the juice, swiped a paper off the stack, and queued up in the express line behind three other sleepy-eyed customers—none of whom, I noted gratefully, had more than ten items.

But the line wasn't moving. I shifted from one foot to the other as the young cashier chatted up her customers, taking her sweet time and even commenting with great interest on their purchases: "Oh, I love cherries! I didn't see these—they look really good." And, "I've never tried this detergent before. Do you like it?" By the time she got to my two items, I was nearing meltdown. When she scanned the carton of juice and the *Chronicle* without hesitating, I thought we might be getting somewhere. But once that was done, she placed my paper squarely in front of her, stared at the headlines, and began reading them to me. Out loud. Slowly and with great interest. "'Rains cause local flooding. Inmate escapes from county jail.' Did you see this?"

I hadn't. But I'd hoped to. At home. With a glass of juice. *For myself.*

"No," I said, "I didn't. And I'd really like to read it *first*, if you don't mind."

Her sweet face fell. Her smile disappeared. Although I instantly

felt guilty for being so rude, I was sure she was about to apologize for dawdling—and for previewing my paper. After all, I had tried to shame her with my words. But she didn't apologize. She looked at me with great concern and said, "You must be having a really bad day."

Oh yes, I was. In more ways than one. She wasn't checking my groceries inaccurately, and she did not have a bad attitude. She wasn't lazy or rude or cranky. She was just slow. And friendly. I was dead wrong, and I knew it. Shame fell over me like a curtain weighted at the hem. My first thought was of how rude I had been to her. My second was, *I hope she doesn't know me from church.*

In that moment I was reminded of a story I'd heard about the late Rich Mullins, traveling in Amsterdam with his buddy Beaker. The two of them were in a train station, talking about the temptations they had encountered in the freewheeling city and how they'd struggled with resisting them. Just then, a man sitting nearby turned to Rich and said, "You're Rich Mullins, aren't you?" Rich's response was, "It depends. What did you just hear?"



God did not leave Adam and Eve for long in their flimsy fig-leaf wardrobe. After He called out to them and they confessed, He made them more durable garments of animal skin and clothed them Himself. His covering confirmed that there *was* something to their shame, and it bore witness to the innocence they had, in fact, lost. He agreed with them that they now needed covering. But He

insisted on doing it Himself, rejecting their self-covering and replacing it with a superior one of His own design. Later He would permanently solve the problem of their shame (along with yours and mine) with the blood of His own Son, clothing His children instead with the righteousness of Christ and the radiance of His resurrected glory.

Like my ancestors, I have my own do-it-yourself shame cover-ups. Words are useful in this regard—especially if you have an apt facility with them. They’re one of my favorite coverings. Like Adam and Eve, I can carefully layer whatever might be close at hand to cover the fact that I see myself as I am but want the rest of the world to see me as I’d like to be. Piousness can be a cover-up. Doing right. Being right. Living right. These are my fig leaves...but they’re never enough. Not enough to justify my sinful nature or even to hide from myself the fact that I’m fatally flawed. At the end of the day, none of my ad hoc fig leaves work.

Much has been made of the fact that God replaced Adam and Eve’s make-do foliage with animal skins, that this was the Bible’s first bloodshed—a foreshadowing, if you will, of richer things to come. I don’t know whether or not it was the first time blood was shed. What I know is that *God* covered them. He said, in effect, “Here. Let Me get that for you. Your sad little camo outfit isn’t working so well.” And even after He did them that great kindness, He knew it wouldn’t be enough.

Why the fig leaf among God’s treasures? Perhaps to remind

Him—and us—of how very fragile we are, how much we needed Him, how much we need Him still. And of how prone to wander His best and brightest creation was and ever is. As a mother tucks away her baby's smallest outfit, one that it wore for such a brief time and will never wear again, He sees our once-worn leaves, and He smiles. We've long outgrown them. He knew we would. But we're covered just the same.



For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.

—ROMANS 5:6–9

I sought the LORD, and He answered me,
And delivered me from all my fears.
They looked to Him and were radiant,
And their faces will never be ashamed.

—PSALM 34:4–5