



## **The Subtle Attack of Shame on Spirituality | An Interview with James Willhite**

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Kurt Francom:

How do you help someone tell their spouse that they have secretly been viewing pornography? Wow, these are tough situations. Thankfully, one of my favorite and most effective therapists, Jeff Struer, put together a presentation about disclosing betrayal. Jeff explains how disclosing betrayal can make recovery and repentance so much more difficult if it isn't handled correctly. This isn't a rip the band-aid off quickly type of situation. With a better understanding of betrayal, church leaders can be a strong resource in helping couples navigate the awful effects of pornography usage. You can watch Jeff's entire presentation at no cost in the Liberating Saints virtual library. Simply go to [leadingsaints.org/14](http://leadingsaints.org/14) and you can sign up for 14 days of free access to Jeff's presentation and the entire library. It's one of my favorite interviews. So you're checking us out as maybe a potential podcast you could start listening to. I know many of you have been listening for a long time, but let me just talk to the newbies for a minute. What is Leading Saints? What are we trying to do here with this podcast? Well, let me explain. Leading Saints is a non-profit organization, a 501c3 is what they call it. And we have a mission to help Latter-day Saints be better prepared to lead. Now, of course, often means in the context of a calling. It may mean in your local community, your work assignments. We've heard about our content influencing all sorts of leaders in all sorts of different contexts. We invite you to listen to this episode and maybe a few others of our 500 plus episodes that we have out there. Jump in and begin to learn and begin to consider some of these principles we talk about on the Leading Saints podcast. Here we go. I'm excited to welcome in a good friend of mine, James Willhite, who is a phenomenal therapist, someone I recommend all the time. He works in the same office as Stephen Shields, who I've had on the podcast several times. It's called Accepted Therapy.

It's one of the top therapy offices I recommend. When anybody asks me personally, who's a good therapist? I send them to Accepted Therapy to see how they can help. All their staff and the team they have there is awesome. and I can't recommend them more. And I wanted to get James in the studio to talk about the big concept of shame. Now, it seems like in 2024, 2025, that we, uh, this is more of an, of a thing that we talk about in the world of research and therapy, but in the religious context, oftentimes we don't know what to do with it. Now I wrote A lot about shame in my book is God disappointed me and that's because I got a lot of that from James and from Steve and from other therapists because this is such a spiritual experience the concept of shame and we go all the way back to the beginning of time quite literally with Adam and Eve and how shame was introduced into their story and why is it that God wants us to focus so much on this story of adam and eve that we literally experience every time we go to the temple right and there's so many lessons that james brings out as far as how do we recognize shame in our life what should we do with it what if life is painful and hard to deal with right should i reach for I want some certainty in life. I crave certainty, but what if it's not there? And all things that go with that with, you know, anxiety, depression, all those therapy dynamics that are happening that people really need help with in these days. So you're going to love it. Here's my interview with James Willhite. Here I am with my good brother from another mother, James Willhite. How are you? Good. How are you, Kurt? Good. Now, I mean, you're a therapist. I am. What kind of therapist? I know you guys, you know, like the initials behind the name, but like, how do you, what kind of therapy you do?

James Willhite:

Well, I'm at CMHC, clinical mental health counselor, but specializing in depression, anxiety, addiction, trauma. Yeah.

Kurt Francom:

And working from there. Yeah. Now these guys don't even pay me to say this, but like Accepted Therapy, that's the therapy office you run. Acceptedlife.com. Acceptedlife.com. And when somebody like calls me and like, Hey Kurt, podcast boy, leading saints guy, like I need some therapy. Yeah. These guys are like my number one. So they didn't even write me a check to say that, but you could. I'm just, we'll work on that. Yeah, for sure. Yeah. We'll talk to the accountant. And whenever I have a therapist on, I'm just curious, like, I'd love to just get a sense of like, what are you seeing? What's walking into your office, the problems, the struggles? I mean, really, they've been the same since the beginning of time. But what are you seeing?

James Willhite:

Well, since the beginning of time, maybe not, because we do get people coming in. Really, a lot of people are wanting help with unwanted pornography use. Yeah. Or unwanted other sexual behavior bigger than that. Right. But yes, we still see a good degree of folks, I think, Frankly, since COVID, we really have seen a rise in people coming in with greater degrees of anxiety and helping people learn like, what's that about? Where's that coming from? And how can we now, because it's becoming quite unmanageable in their lives, you know? Yeah. Yeah. So, you know, we see it and then some people just know, oh, I have this trauma. I have this thing that happened and I know that I need healing from that. keeps coming up in life. Or this thing happened a year ago and it's looping in my mind or it's it's become problematic, you know, so we'll, you know, see anything from, you know, they were, you know, in a shouting match with a spouse or something like that. And it got, you know, that shouting just became very fearful to, you know, a rape victim that might come into our office. So we do have you know, we'll work with any trauma as well. Childhood trauma all the way through to something that happened, you know, six months ago or something. And the person's finding, oh, this is not going away. Yeah.

Kurt Francom:

And you work with Steve Shields, who we've had on the podcast a few times.

James Willhite:

Steve and I founded Accepted togeTher.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah. So people can get a sense like from those other episodes that I've had him come on just talking about like we talk about therapy from a leadership standpoint. It's like, yeah, someone should go to therapy. And in our mind, that's like one thing, like you go into this room, you sit on a couch, you talk it out. And I don't know, magically, they say stuff or they. They've got research and it just sort of works. And your, I mean, your approach at Accepted is a little bit different. Would you say, how would you articulate just how you handle these individuals that come in with these intense problems or struggles?

James Willhite:

Yeah, we just, we use some scientifically proven methods to just really move the trauma. There is a time and a place for talk therapy and there's time and a place for some other modalities. We use many experiential modalities really where someone gets to have a felt experience happen

within their nervous system. And that can often shift the trauma because trauma is going to happen when I didn't have a voice or a choice and didn't quite have power capacity in the moment to do something different. And, you know, we can eventually what we, I mean, we help somebody feel safe enough in their body and in the nervous system to have that experience kind of re-experienced in a way that feels safe and secure for them, you know, so that the brain and the nervous system feels a sense of resolve and a different outcome and it shifts the trauma. It gives the person, I've had clients just like, yeah, this would play in my head every like 30 minutes or so and that replay is just gone. It's just over because they found how to, you know, in this client's example, felt what safety felt like in their nervous system and knew that they could get there again in their nervous system at any given time.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah. And what I preach about this, because like you said, there's a time for maybe talk therapy. Let's get in a room, let's intellectually articulate what happened or what's going on, what you're feeling. But then there's a whole nother level when it's, because a lot of the time the trauma or the negative experience happens on a physical level.

James Willhite:

You know, the body keeps the score, you know, and traumas is stored, you know, in the body, nervous system, brainstem. And so we just work to utilize the mind and body to incorporate a whole body, a whole experience healing. Yeah. Yeah, really cool. So, you know, I mean, that's really at the core. I really believe that, like, once we can remove the trauma that is in the way, then people can really then that's where Jesus can come in and do the healing part. Right. And I'm just, you know, I want to be a facilitate helping move the trauma and let Jesus do his thing.

Kurt Francom:

Right. And he's good at it.

James Willhite:

He knows what he's doing.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah. And I think this is just, I guess what I'm also getting at is as leaders, maybe refer individuals to therapy. It might be worthwhile, like either having the individual ask the therapist or like, what type of therapy are we going to do? Because in our mind, it's just like, it's therapy or it's not, but just know like, what are you sending him to? We're just going to talk about it for six weeks. We got to do other things. Yeah.

James Willhite:

I mean, I encourage anybody that goes into therapy to really, if they don't know that it's a good fit for them after the first session, move on. You can know after the first session whether or not it's a good fit for you and you know that this person is going to take you where you want to go. I hope that when you go in and see that therapist, they explain what their modalities are and what their goal or plan is for you after that first session. Hey, this is where we're headed. This is what I think is going to happen. It can take anywhere from this long to this long. rather than signing up for, we're just going to help you manage this for the rest of your life. You know, we really do. Our kind of motto at Accepted is experience healed, like healed. And I think Steve probably has talked about that.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah. We did an episode just about this therapy or does healing actually happen, right? Or are we just managing problems and mortality until we die? But healing does happen. Healing happens. Jesus does indeed heal right here today. Yeah. So we referenced the beginning of time earlier. Let's, I want to go back there. The outline you talked about, just, you know, let's talk about Adam and Eve because that's where not only was man created, but therapy was also created as far as like the need for therapy was created back in there. And a lot of people don't realize this, but you know, I've released a book in early 2024 is God disappointed in me. You, Steve, some others in your office. I mean, we have a brotherhood that I so much appreciate. And so I gave you my manuscript. I ran it by you and I said, just grill me on it. And I, and there was a moment where I think you and Steve are in the room and you basically told me, well, not that you told me this, but I left that meeting thinking I have to rewrite chapter one. You guys are in the, uh, you know, in the, what do you call it? The gratitude portion of the book, but because chapter one was about shame, you know, and anything I really know about shame, you guys have really helped me refine it and understand it because shame, we just swim in it. I mean, it's everywhere. Our mutual friend Becky says it's a shame glitter, right? Just gets on everything, no matter how many times you vacuum and still there. Right. And shame was really introduced in the garden. Where's a good jumping off point as far as this concept of Adam and Eve and shame and the adversary.

James Willhite:

Well, you know, I like to look at, you know, the Genesis story, the Adam and Eve story as why is God telling us this story and why is it so critical that we learn this to the point where it's, you know, portrayed in the temple. In our theology, it's really emphasized, right? Right. And so God must think that, you know, this story is really important. And as we know, God teaches through symbols and symbolism. Well, so what is the symbolism of the story? And that's the beautiful thing about it is that symbolism can be so rich and layered. And so from a therapist perspective, because that's where I have an education, I can see symbols and richness in the Adam and Eve story that applies to what I do every day. And so, when I look at the Adam and Eve story, I'm really, you know, for me lately, last, I guess, several years, I'm like, what is God trying to reveal to me through this Adam and Eve story about his true character and nature? What is God trying to reveal to me about Satan's true character and nature? And what is he trying to reveal to me about my character in nature as, you know, now fallen man potentially or pre-fallen and kind of like what might be a natural tendency. And so, really a great jumping off point I think is, you know, we have Abba Maeve in the garden and Eve then is beguiled by the serpent who in the scriptures, I don't think it's a coincidence that the serpent was the most subtle of all the beasts. And that subtlety, I think, is then in reference to his main weapon that he uses, which is shame.

Kurt Francom:

It is so subtle, right?

James Willhite:

Right. It's so much so that, you know, I'll often do exercises with a client and be like, we're going to talk about shame. And, you know, so we'll sit and talk about shame for a few minutes and then I'll be like, hey, name five kind of negative emotions that you might deem as negative emotions. And then they'll name five negative emotions and not name shame as one of them. Even though we've just been talking about it, it's that subtle that it's just, oh, I forgot it was there. And so the first thing that Satan really, you know, one of the first things that you see in the Adam and Eve story is the quick hide, see you are naked. Yeah. You know, quick hide. And so, that's what shame does. So, it's a main tool that I see that, you know, the adversary is going to use to cause us to hide. Hide from who? God. Because that's when he told them to hide was when Adam and Eve were like, oh, God's walking in the garden. We should go see him. And Satan's like, whoa, whoa, whoa, you can't go see him. You should hide. So, you're naked.

Kurt Francom:

Which there's a lot of irony there because it's the wounding that happens, the shame that's felt, and the answer to that negative experience is God himself. Right, right. And so of course he wants you to hide from it because then it will ruminate, right? It'll persist.

James Willhite:

Right, exactly. And so in the hiding, that just to me that reveals this is Satan's primary weapon to divide us and separate us from God. Right? Yeah. That's the main thing he's going to use to cause us to do that. And so, and that is shows up over and over and over and over and over again in my therapy office is this hiding. And shame is more often than not, like 90% of the time at the root of that hiding.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah. What does it look like, like in your office, like some hypothetical situations? How do people hide even when they may not realize it?

James Willhite:

It's just there's a hiding of, they're hiding from God in that rather than taking my heart to God for healing, instead I am going to work really hard and earn a bunch of money so that everybody else will tell me that I'm enough and that I'm okay, rather than actually just simply taking my heart to God and asking what he thinks about it. Yeah. Yeah. Right. So that's a form of hiding. And in that hiding, rather than approaching God for my repentance and my healing, I'm now approaching my fallen mortal fellow men to tell me that I'm enough, to tell me that my heart is good, to tell me that I'm worth something. when in reality I'm really just hiding because I feel ashamed of my nakedness or innocence or inadequacy, and I'm trying to become now adequate and prove my adequacy to myself and others through means that actually won't ever satisfy. Right.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah. And again, I appreciate this theme of the subtlety of shame of it is because it's like, what do you mean? I mean, wasn't I supposed to get a job? Wasn't I supposed to write for my family and and do so really well? So what do you mean I'm hiding from God? You know, but it's like then you have this like this realization of like, oh, wow, like you're right. If you took that from me, like I would feel exposed or I'd feel like, you know, maybe I'm not valuable to my family because I'm not providing or giving something. Right.

James Willhite:

In the shame and in the hiding, this is where, you know, in my opinion, this is where really the adverse, it's the devil's playground.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah.

James Willhite:

Okay. Because he'll introduce a new theology to you. And it's going to, to your point, it's going to, there's going to be a lot of aspects of it that are easily turned and you can bring into your church and world experience. So that basically he'll introduce this by implying the quick, see you're a naked quick kite. He's implying that, oh, you're not worthy to be in the presence of God. You're not allowed to be in the presence of God until you fix it. So you see it, it immediately becomes anti-atonement. because now it's your job to be your own savior rather than leaning on Jesus to be your savior. So that's the first thing he's going to do. And he therefore really creating perfectionism, right? So if any of y'all listeners identify as a perfectionist, I would say you probably have some shame scripts going on and the adversary is going to mess with you in that. Okay. So perfectionism and shame are best friends.

Kurt Francom:

Or we, how it comes up in my life a lot is that I'm, something's out of line or just, I'm not settled in life. Something's off and I want to get rid of the feeling. And so it's, I naturally go to, well, what could I, I probably need to go, I probably just need to get my family scripture study in line. Right. We go to these places of like, maybe if I'm a little bit more perfect, then this discontent will go away. Right. And it's not that I'm thinking intellectually like, Oh yes, God does not see me worthy. You know, it's more of like, I've got to get to get myself to a place so that then I can manage life when in reality, it's turning to God that manages life, right?

James Willhite:

Right. Yeah. And then if in your turning to God, God is like, hey, Kurt, would you lean into me some more with some scriptures? That's going to feel very different, right? Exactly. And so what the adversary instead will do is be like, hey, Kurt, you're not enough. And so you need to hustle and earn your worth, okay? And inevitably, as I'm out there hustling and trying to earn my worth before God so that I can then approach Him, what I'm going to do is inevitably fail because I'm a human being. And as I experienced then that failure of that, that's going to reinforce, see, I told



you you weren't enough. And then it will cause you to then try harder. But in that not enough, I'll also experience a great deal of pain. And then here's where the adversary is going to play with some more. Now he's going to attack your identity, Kurt. He's going to say, hey, Kurt, Maybe you're just broken, like you're too far gone. Like you just are never going to get there. And I think God is just, even if you did go to him, yeah, he's not going to take you. And then when he's separating you from your own identity as God's son, Now he's going to attack God's identity and start to lie to you about the character and nature of God. He's going to start to tell you, yeah, God is just not that good. He's a mean and vengeful God. He's just waiting for you to step out of line. And he's more than ready to execute the judgment and, you know, declare the verdict of guilty at any moment.

Kurt Francom:

Right. Yeah. I don't want to go to that God's church because it doesn't feel good.

James Willhite:

Right. And, right. And that's kind of at the extreme end, but, and I painted on the extremes to really just show that this pattern that starts to emerge and more often than not, it's a lot more subtle than that. Right.

Kurt Francom:

So take me maybe, you know, if you were coaching maybe a church leader who has someone coming in and they're sort of recognizing like, Oh, this person, they feel discontent, but they're, they're looking for the, the perfectionism script to fix it, or they want to do more like, Anything like how do you respond to that person? What should we have in mind when we see someone we love in that sort of that shame cycle?

James Willhite:

Well, you know, the first thing that one, I'm going to help the person identify that that's what's happening. Because again, shame is so subtle. We have to know it's there and we have to see what's happening in order to name and be like, oh, wait a minute. This is some shame on that's being put on me. And I'm stepping into this belief system that's actually false. that I need to earn my worth before God, I have to save myself rather than lean on the Savior for my saving, right? And so, first of all, it's just teaching somebody what, and everybody is going to kind of have their own, what does shame look like, feel like, sound like, right, in my head for me? More often than

not though, the dialogue is about the same. It's, if somebody really knew who I was, they would run, they would be disgusted, they would not want me, they would, it's just, it's this overall, the script is not enough. That's the general script of shame. Not enough or too much. And often both. Right. Okay.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah.

James Willhite:

And so if I know that and I know the language now of shame and I recognize that that's what the adversaries I'm seeing his weapon that he's shooting at me. Now I can start to choose something different because what I can start to do is one I can be like, oh, this isn't truth. what is truth and I'm now looking back to the Savior and what does God say about me as his child. And again, we've often grown up hearing it, but we don't believe it because shame will put this kind of filter that it blocks out all the good and lets in all the bad. And so at the same time, I have to start talking to myself with true self-compassion. And basically extending the grace to me that God extends to me as well. Yeah. Extending me the same grace that Jesus offers.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah. And it goes back to what we talked about earlier. Intellectually, we can get there of like, yeah, I know he loves me. Yeah. And we can say that as many times as we want, but if we don't feel it, you know, that's where the shame is there. And from my experience and also like, helping others, like just getting, just naming it and like recognizing the dynamic that's happening of like, I don't necessarily know what to do with this, but I'm in a state of shame right now. I'm feeling shame. I don't, again, I don't know how to get rid of it, but okay, maybe I'll just breathe for a minute, you know, and, and rather than beat myself up or, or lean into that shame message, you know.

James Willhite:

Yeah, I mean, so, I did this myself. I've encouraged clients to do the same, to go on a shame adventure, where basically... Sounds fun, James. Yeah, it's so thrilling, where whenever I noticed shame coming up in my life, I was like, ooh, pause, stop. There it is. What's going on? What's that about? So, I remember coming home from work one time and portraying to my wife that I had been working like really hard. It was a real grind and everything. And then I was like,

oh, wait a minute, stop. I'm like, Christy, I'm kind of lying to you. I'm trying to make you think something about me that's not totally accurate. Because I'd had this shame script around, you know, you have to work hard and always be working hard and, you know, this hard work, you know, ethos that's kind of built into, you know, American society. And no, the real truth is, while I did work hard, it was actually a lot of fun. I found it really fulfilling and it actually didn't feel a lot like work. I really enjoyed that and I was trying to portray some other image of that so that you would think something, I was trying somehow to protect, you know, and change that shame script for me.

Kurt Francom:

Almost like I want to convince myself I deserve something and I need to be able to get to a I worked really hard so that I deserve it.

James Willhite:

And so that you'll approve of me for working hard. Yeah. Again, so now I'm asking, in a way, I'm, you know, I'm seeking your approval versus God's approval. Right. And that's, again, that's the power of the hide, because now, you know, Satan has separated me from God. And so now I'm turning to others to get my approval rather than turning to God to get my approval. I'm turning to others to get my validation, to others to get my direction in life. rather than God to get my validation, to get my direction. And again, over in this shame area, you know, as my identity is being attacked and so is God's, I am less likely to trust God.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah.

James Willhite:

Cause it's implicit again in the quick hide. It implies, Oh wait, God's not trustworthy with your shame, with your pain, with your nakedness. Yeah. He's not going to handle it. Well, right. You know, he'll reject you the minute he sees. Right. Yeah. When in reality, now we can get on to the other side of right, the Adam and Eve story. How does God then reveal himself to be? What is he really like? Yeah.

Kurt Francom:

So, well, and this is, I want to emphasize here, like a lot of church leaders can listen to this and be like, oh, this is great. Like I kind of have a better idea of how I can help individuals who come into my office or who are in my core. When my journey's been and you and others have helped me like understand of like, like nobody, as Brene Brown says, nobody writes for free, right? It's not like there's a class in mortality that never really has to deal with shame or they've figured out to a point that it's not really an issue. Like shame is so pervasive, so just everywhere, right? So another plug and we'll mention this again at the end, but through accepting others, but you and Steve produced a podcast called Unashamed, Unafraid. And you talk about shame or you share personal stories of men who've overcome addiction or sex addiction. But in essence, you're talking about shame. And we'll link to the episode that I was on. I was the guest. And we talk about that. Yeah, that's not part of my story as far as sexual addiction or struggles with pornography. But shame was still there. It was still a part of the story. And there were still places I went to that were maybe less stigmatized, but still full of shame, looking to validate my existence. Right. So I just want also as leaders learn from this, I also want them to sort of take a breath and think, how is this showing up in my life? Just because I'm the bishop doesn't mean that shame isn't there. Like, yeah. And sometimes it's there in less maybe stigmatized ways and we still hide in other ways. But anyways.

James Willhite:

Yeah, it reminds me of what you're talking about reminds me of, I think, Elder Holland talking to one of the new apostles as they came in and he's like, don't drink the Kool-Aid or whatever, meaning like don't take on that validation as that kind of don't buy it. That's shame entering into the process. Yeah.

Kurt Francom:

And it's so good though, James. I mean, anyways, anything else as far as I know the point here, maybe you've touched on as far as the blessings God gave to Adam and Eve, but anything else before that, or have you touched on that? Where do you want to go from There?

James Willhite:

Yeah, really, I just looking at the Adam and Eve story, if we look at, you know, the goodness and nature of God, that's what he's like in the Adam and Eve story. He's like, look, here's what happens. Here's what Satan's going to do to you to try to get you off track. And in the Garden of Eden, again, he's like, Adam, where art thou? Right. And that's right. And that's when we put on

the fig leaf. Right. And so in the temple, I believe that's why we still wear the apron. I truly believe that at any given moment in our lives, God is asking us, where art thou?

Kurt Francom:

And such a powerful question. Like even, I'll emphasize this maybe like in, as I'm the Elders Quorum president at the end of an Elders Quorum meeting, I'll just simply sort of gather all the men and say, before we leave, I just want to ask you the question that God asked Adam, where are you? Right. Like, and it's so, you can't help, but like kind of take a step back and be like, you know, yeah, where am I? I think I'm good, but am I? Like was this week, An awesome week.

James Willhite:

And it's a great invitation to step into how am I hiding from God?

Kurt Francom:

Yeah.

James Willhite:

How am I hiding from myself? Right. How am I hiding from others or, you know, allowing them to take the place of, in a way, take the place of God by that's the person I'm or the people that I'm really seeking my sense of like worth and value from.

Kurt Francom:

And if you can't answer that question, it's worth sitting with and taking to God or taking to others that, you know, I'm having a hard time understanding where am I or how I'm hiding. And then you might have the, Oh, you know what? When that conversation with my wife, you know, that may be his indicator where I'm hiding. And because if you can't articulate it or identify it, it's hard to address it. Right. Right. Yeah.

James Willhite:

So then we go to, if we just look at how God responds when they finally do come out of hiding, right? Again, I think God shows us appropriate repentance. I know a lot of people like to, you know, kind of think that maybe Adam and Eve were kind of playing the blame game. I think they were actually too innocent for that. I think they're, in my opinion, their response was as straightforward and honest as it could have been. That was, the woman that you gave me gave me the fruit and I ate. And she said, and the serpent beguiled me and I ate. How more specific could they be? And honest could they be? I'm just observing what happened. It is straightforward and honest. Yeah. It's like a model of like, just be straightforward about what happened. Right. And if you, you know, and I think we know that you're like, God doesn't shame them for that. He doesn't get mad at them for that. Instead, what he immediately does is he's like, Satan, what are you doing? So like, doesn't even address Adam and Eve for their transgression. Their punishment or, you know, timeout for you.

Kurt Francom:

Right.

James Willhite:

He turns immediately to say, well, what are you doing? And then immediately he puts enmity between us and he disempowers Satan and empowers us immediately. And then the next thing he does is he gives them the covenants. Right. Well, if you promise, then I promise. So he enters now into a relationship with us. It's like, no, I'll take care of you. I promise. Okay. Just trust me. Stop hiding in the, over there in the bushes and just trust me. I've got you. I promise. Right.

Kurt Francom:

One thing I want to highlight here is that enmity or that the way he empowers us is through Jesus Christ, right? Like that's what he puts between exactly. Yeah. The serpent. Yeah.

James Willhite:

And then again, he symbolically, then again, gives us Jesus through he makes coats of skins. Yeah. Right.

Kurt Francom:

Which is a literal representation of the Savior. Yeah. That's been highlighted more recently with the endowment of like what I'm giving you, what you're putting on every day is Jesus. Jesus. Right.

James Willhite:

So, again, you are shielded through him. You don't need to hide. He has got you covered. Literally, he's got you covered. And here's the part where, you know, this is a this is a fun part that I like to kind of go to is we can learn in the really in the temple is I think that often we as human beings can misunderstand and misinterpret some of the blessings that then God pronounce on Adam and Eve as they are cast out. Okay. So one of the, the first things he says is that again, it's for thy sake, right? I will curse the ground for thy sake, meaning I don't curse you. I'm cursing the ground for you. Right. Interesting. Yeah. So settled again. Right. Yeah. And then I will multiply your sorrow. for your sake. Right. Like, Oh, interesting. Wait, that's for my good. That's for my growth. Right. So if we, but more often than not, we often will misinterpret our pain and our sorrow as some sort of punishment that God is meeting out upon us.

Kurt Francom:

He didn't curse us because as I'm not, he didn't curse us as a disgusting mortal that I can barely even look at. Right. Yeah.

James Willhite:

Yeah. And again, you know, Joseph Smith said, we believe that all men will be punished for their own sins and not for Adam's transgression. Well, if that were the case, then he cursed the ground because of Adam's transgression. And therefore we are all now cursed because of Adam's sins. Right. So now all of a sudden we're, we're buying that false doctrine again.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah.

James Willhite:

Okay. So it's anti-theatrical to believe to Mormon theology, to believe that the curse on the ground is a curse on us, right? That the multiplication of sorrow is a curse on us, right? Not a blessing that God is giving us. Because again, God is more interested in our growth and becoming likened to the gods and discerning good from the evil. than he is about how pleasurable this life is. He's more, again, he wants our growth, our hearts. He wants us to lean on the Savior the whole time, knowing it would be painful. And so as we misinterpret that again, that's where I think, you know, the adversary will be like, see, God is not as good as he says he is. That's a tough place to experience sorrow and pain from. But if we can believe God is as good as he says he is, it changes my perspective as I go through sorrow. It changes my perspective as I go through pain.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah.

James Willhite:

Because it's not about me because I did something wrong or because God's punishing me. It's me being in a fallen world that God will then make beauty from ashes. And like over and over again, like the story is replete with fallen mortal men in a fallen mortal world that then experience God's miracles and help throughout. They experience the atonement over and over again, empowering their lives, changing their lives in unmistakable ways that it had to be God.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah.

James Willhite:

There was no other answer. Yeah.

Kurt Francom:

So take me to like your office as you're sitting and articulating this to someone who's struggling, like, like, where's the connection point for them to move past the intellect, intellectually understanding that, like, how do they understand that God is that good, you know?



James Willhite:

That can take, it's different for everybody. Yeah. That's their own kind of journey, but the invitation really, it's going to go back to the shame and where has my identity been lost or stolen or what false identity have I picked up about me? Because if I can really truly see myself rightly as God's son, period, end of story done, that's it. And then if I can believe that God is good and is as good as he says, and that his word is actually his word, that all the covenants we've made and all the blessings that we hear and the initiatory and the endowment and the sealing, those are all actually true about him and what he wants for us. Well, wait a minute. And that's, I'm a son to that. Yeah. I'm an heir to that. It's powerful. That can change everything. Yeah. And you know, to the degree that shame has wounded you, you know, or me, I know my journey was long. I walked with a very heavy shame identity at the beginning of my journey. This work, you know, the work was not fast for me. Yeah. Yeah. But it was incredibly healing. Right. Right. Yeah. And, you know, to where like, oh, I will continue to see where I don't believe that God is good. And I'm like, oh, shoot. I'm not. Again, sometimes I just don't see it.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah.

James Willhite:

But the more and more I continue to just lean into that and do that, I, again, he shows up in miraculous ways in my life. And so that's where in the office, I'm really going to start with what do you believe about you? Yeah. You know, and I'll, and I'll see and help them break some of the fallacies, hopefully about the way that they see Themselves.

Kurt Francom:

And that takes me to the sort of the, you're, you're famous for asking this question on your podcast where, you know, there are people are unpacking their timeline and you'll often ask them like as a child or as a teenager, as you were, you know, swimming in the shame, how did you see God? And then near the end you'll ask them, and how do you see him now? Right. Like that's a powerful question for a leader to ask of saying, wait, time out. Like, how do you see God? Right. And not only how do you see yourself? Yeah.

James Willhite:

How do you see yourself and how do you see God? And often I'll just ask, how do you see God? Because that will tell me how they see Themselves.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah. It's like almost the same question. Yeah. Yeah. Right.

James Willhite:

And it's a powerful question to look at, you know, for folks who are really looking to, again, if we understand, well, I mean, it's Joseph Smith quote, if men don't understand the character and of God, they don't, or if they don't comprehend God, they don't comprehend themselves. Right. Yeah. That's powerful. And then he, you know, in that same lecture, he said, you know, it is the first principle of the gospel to learn the true character and nature of God. And then McConkie basically said the same thing, our life's purpose is to come to know the true character and nature of God. So I'm like, I hear those quotes and I'm like, okay, I've got that directive and sitting from where I'm at and working with clients, I see why that is such a powerful directive. Because once we understand who God is in our relationship to him, everything can change. And I hear that preached from almost every single conference. That relationship and that true understanding of that relationship being so key and critical, it gets brought up a ton. President Nelson, you know, all the way down, many of them will mention it. over and over again, the critical nature of truly understanding that yes, I am a child of God. We learn it in primary, but at some point it's got to land. Yeah.

Kurt Francom:

And the way that's helped me is like just to add that we talked about the enabling power of that. Because we think like, yeah, of course, intellectually, I want to know the nature of God, like how he thinks, why he does things. But when he reveals himself to me, his true nature, like there's nothing I, I can't help but dedicate my life to him, dedicate my journey, like, and which means I'll do anything you want, which means I'll stop sinning, which, you know, I want to give all my sins away to him if I know who he is and where we sometimes get too caught up in the, you know, the perfectionism or like, well, maybe I just need to do more of like, no, just bring yourself to God and behold his nature. And that is the most motivating force in the universe.

James Willhite:

Yeah. So if I can pivot back to just something we were touching on, you know, many of us have heard the saying, you know, there's two inevitable things in life, death and taxes. They're just inevitable. They're always going to happen. Well, why do we say that? Why is that out there? I think that's there to help people just cope with the fact that they're going to happen. So, it teaches us to not maybe, you know, it's kind of this emotional preparation that I don't need to rail against these things and kind of get so angry about it. Again, it's a form of like, I just need to accept that it is, right? And so that brings me back to the blessings that God gave Adam and Eve of, well, by the sweat of the eyebrow, meaning like work is a blessing. And often we spend so much of our lives trying to work really quick and then not work or to work really hard and then have an early retirement so I can not work. Rather than this true, like, no, if you embrace the idea that constant work is just a fact of life, whether you're actually retired or not, life is still work. It's work to be a human being. It just takes work to breathe, you know, to get up and breathe and do life every day. Whether you have a job or not, work is inevitably going to fall upon you. The other inevitability in life is pain, sorrow. And if we can just accept that constant work and pain and sorrow are a fact of life rather than trying to avoid it, right? So, more often than not, I find, you know, folks struggling with depression or addiction, they're often trying simply to avoid pain rather than rightly seeing pain not as an enemy. So, it's sort of like if I know that work and pain are inevitabilities and I can actually in a way embrace that they're just going to happen and accept that that's part of life, sometimes that can just create that shift, that mental shift of like it doesn't need to be almost like a surprise to me or a punishment. And then the last thing that God gives us is he casts us out of his presence. Meaning we have to walk by faith. Or another word that a lot of people come into the office, they hate uncertainty. Right. Okay. Yeah. And uncertainty is an inevitable fact of life. And if I can embrace uncertainty as a fact of life, Truly embrace that I can never really be certain about very many things. Right. There are a few things we can be certain about, but not much. Right. Right. If I can embrace uncertainty, what it will allow me to do is then in my experiences, I've started to embrace the uncertainty as it allows me to trust God and lean into his goodness more. Because I'm not in control. I can't be in control. But He knows what's best for me. And no matter what happens in my life, whether it's my fault or not, He will make beauty for ashes. He is a God who keeps His promises.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah.

James Willhite:

He always is what he says he is. So even if I'm experiencing a painful thing and I didn't, you know, again, often I'm trying to control to not get into pain, but if I just can allow it as, you know, a thing, sure. It sucks. Sure. It's not fun to go through. And I know in whom I have trusted. Yeah. Yeah. It's an opportunity to lean in and have that faith. Right.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah.

James Willhite:

And I know that, frankly, people, you know, listening on the show that have struggled with decades of depression and things like that, that's going to sound really hard to hear. Right? Yeah. You know, and I, you know, I have lived with personally experienced severe, severe depression and I know how that or Sarah will mess with us in that place. And especially when it's been going on for so many years, you know? Yeah. That can be difficult to embrace uncertainty, to embrace the pain, you know, to embrace the work of it. It's hard work to be depressed for sure. Right.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah, and oftentimes, you know, it's a sort of common phrase therapists will say is if you can't feel it, you can't heal it, right? Sort of that first step is to feel it. You have to feel the pain, to feel the sorrow. And then, you know, we have a man of sorrows that will sit with us in it. And then by that time you come through it, Because that's the sometimes it's like, OK, there's this issue I'm feeling pain. I'm in your office, James, because fix it. Like, give me a five step plan. How do I fix it? But it's more of like, let's experience it. Like, let's go on that journey. The shame adventure. Go on a shame adventure and see what we can learn.

James Willhite:

It's just actually allowing ourselves to feel feelings that we didn't, you know, aren't fully allowing ourselves to feel. More often than not, I find that people are shaming themselves for the feelings they're having. Oh, I shouldn't feel like that. It's quite surprising to me how many people are shocked that they're allowed to feel anger or they believe that it's sinful to be angry and feel angry. Yeah. You know, again, that emotional suppression does not serve us. Yeah. We have to be whole human beings. And I would say it's an operation of shame when we try to suppress and truly just a full on avoid feeling our whole selves. Now we can use maladaptive waves to cope with our anger, for example. Right. And we can just give people tools to healthily manage and express and work out emotions.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah. And orienting back towards just the church leader experience, sometimes there's power in just having someone there to witness that experience, right? Not that you're going to tell them what to do or how to get through it, but just being that leader or that therapist that says, wow, you're angry. Tell me more. Like, just let them get it out, you know?

James Willhite:

Yeah. More often than not, that's what I would recommend most spouses and leaders to do is just sit with someone in their difficult emotional experience. They actually don't need your advice. They don't need you to fix it. And in fact, in your effort to fix it, you might actually be causing them to feel shame around the fact that they're having the emotion because in a way you're like, hey, stop having that. Right. Yeah. When in reality, it might just actually be you as a spouse or as a leader who's uncomfortable with the fact that they're having that emotion. Right. And so you're trying to be like, Hey, stop doing that emotion because it's making me uncomfortable.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah. Right. Yeah. I remember as a Bishop, one thing I'd often say is I'd say, you know, in sitting in the Bishop's office to say, Hey, this room is really special in the church because you can yell in this room. You can swear in this room. You can be anything, any feeling, any emotion you want. And I'll be right here. And we'll figure it out. Yeah. It'll be okay. And just sort of get allowing them to say like, no, like you can, you can release that here. This is a sacred place, you know?

James Willhite:

Yeah. And that's what God wants us to do. Yeah. His shoulders are big enough to carry our, our anger that, you know, those moments when we want to just cuss and curse God. I think so many times, you know, I thought, well, I'm going to go to hell if I shake my fist at heaven and curse God, you know, but I've had those moments where I've been like, God, what are you doing? You know, and I've shaken my fist. I'm like, what were you thinking? Yeah. Thinking right. But in my anger, right. God's like, Oh, look at my, you know, look at my cute little son there, James having a tantrum, you know, like he gets it. Yeah. You know, he knows me. He knows I love him. He's not going to be upset with me for having a tantrum and blaming him for a minute. He's like, okay, now we got that done. Okay. Come sit on my lap. What do you need? You know? Right. So yeah, it's powerful.

Kurt Francom:

Anything else we've talked about the uncertainty, the work, the pain, sorrow, anything else we're missing or?

James Willhite:

No, I think, you know, those were some of just really those key components that I have really learned out of the Adam and Eve story. Again, it's like God really is that good. And by nature, God put in our nature as his sons and daughters to come out of hiding and seek him. Their first instinct was, oh, I hear his voice, let's go. It was Satan that said, oh, wait, you need to hide. And so again, it's just that he's revealing the tactics of the enemy of shame and all the subtlety under which it operates. And I think, you know, it's just powerful that the Lord saw fit to say, hey, this is the number one tool. This is his first weapon. And frankly, in my experience, probably his most powerful is shame. And so I think that's why God is telling us, hey, watch out for this. This is right here. This is who your enemy is. This is who I am. So trust me, not him.

Kurt Francom:

That concludes this episode of the Leading Saints podcast. We'd love to hear from you about your questions or thoughts or comments. You can either leave a comment on the post related to this episode at [leadingsaints.org](http://leadingsaints.org) or go to [leadingsaints.org](http://leadingsaints.org) contact and send us your perspective or questions. If there's other episodes or topics you'd like to hear on the Leading Saints podcast, go to [leadingsaints.org](http://leadingsaints.org) slash contact and share with us the information there. And we would love for you to share this with any individual you think this would apply to, especially maybe individuals in your ward council or other leaders that you may know who would really appreciate the perspectives that we discussed. Remember, learn more about disclosing betrayal from Jeff Struer by visiting [leadingsaints.org](http://leadingsaints.org) slash 14.

Elder Gordon B. Hinckley:

It came as a result of the position of leadership which was imposed upon us by the God of heaven who brought forth a restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ. When the declaration was made concerning the only true and living church upon the face of the earth, we were immediately put in a position of loneliness. The loneliness of leadership from which we cannot shrink nor run away and to which we must face up with boldness and courage and ability.