

REDEMPTION /RƏ'DEM(P)SH(ə)N/NOUN

AN ACT OF REDEEMING OR ATONING FOR A FAULT OR MISTAKE; DELIVERANCE; RESCUE.



"IN HIM WE HAVE REDEMPTION THROUGH HIS BLOOD, THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS, ACCORDING TO THE RICHES OF HIS GRACE." EPHESIANS 1:7

Well, so much for laying low while I get my stuff together.

"I don't think you understand how much stress your little disappearing act has caused Shanice and me!" Toni exclaimed. "The *Sanctified Scribe* publishing company emailed me this morning and said that it's severing all ties with you and is no longer interested in publishing anymore of your written work. So, now we have to find another Christian publisher that wasn't scared off by your scandal, if that's even possible. Oh, and that Spiritfy podcast co-host opportunity with two of the biggest Christian influencers, which would've been great for your brand, and made us all thousands of dollars richer, completely fell through! And, you know, it's not like I could even try to set up any meetings to patch things up and at least get them to *consider* hearing you out, because I had no idea where you were! And you don't want to know what I had to do to find out where you were! You've got me all the way out here in Eden Swamp!"

Amara started to correct Toni and tell her that the town was actually called *Eden Springs*, but she decided to keep her mouth shut. Toni was obviously going to be heated for a while.

Ever since her manager, Toni, and her publicist, Shanice, had found out that she was hiding out at her aunt's bed and breakfast, they'd turned her room into a makeshift damage control center. Toni was positioning a ring light around her phone to prepare to record a video of Amara telling her side of her affair with Pastor Monroe (while fussing at her), and Shanice was simultaneously trying to discuss talking points with Amara while comparing potential outfits, in between Toni's rants.

"Let's go with the yellow dress. It's bright, hopeful and will look amazing with your skin tone," Shanice said.

Amara nodded, quickly showered and changed into the dress.

"The goal is to send the message that while you're remorseful for what you've done, you're not some disgraced 'relentless temptress' who's going to run and hide for the rest of her life because of a past mistake." Shanice said, once Amara had emerged from the bathroom. "You're holding yourself accountable for your actions, but you're not wallowing in shame. Be responsible and reflective. Don't make yourself look like the victim by focusing too much on his part in the affair or making a bunch of excuses for why the relationship happened, but do point out that you had no knowledge about the video before all of this came out."

"Be transparent about why you made the choices you made in the past, how they've shaped you for the better in the present and how you're going to move forward into the future."

"Ok. Are we ready?" Toni asked.

"Ready as I'll ever be," Amara replied.

"Alright. Let's fix this mess!"

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“I know that a lot of you are probably curious to hear my side of the story about what happened with Pastor Monroe, and some of you may be wondering why I haven’t said much since he basically threw me under the bus for our affair. I could tell you that it was because I just needed time to clear my head and hear from God, but that would only be part of the truth. The other part is that I was doing what I’ve done for my entire life when things have gotten too hard--I was running. When my dad got sick and then died when I was 13, I ran from everything that reminded me of him, including the church where he used to minister. I was physically there, but I’d mentally and spiritually checked out. When I was 14, my mom left to go ‘find herself,’ and she never came back. Then, in high school I dealt with bullying and self-esteem issues, so I ran from school all of the time. I got to college, slept around way too much because of my self-esteem issues, and I felt like I wasn’t smart enough or good enough to be there, so I quit. I ran to a job at a church, where I fell in lust with a man who reminded me so much of my father--intelligent, authoritative and affirming--that I convinced myself that it didn’t matter that what I was doing was problematic.”

“Since he made me feel good, and he treated me well, that was good enough for me. When that entanglement fell through, and I quit my job, I ran to God to help me get my life together. Then I ran to social media to give me the career and gratification I wanted. As you guys know, this scandal has made things go left in that area.”

“I’m not saying all of this so that you can feel sorry for me. I’m saying this to be completely transparent and hopefully help someone who, like me, realizes that they have to face their issues and stop running. I could’ve asked for help from people who cared about me. I could’ve been honest with myself about my issues. I could’ve made different choices or handled situations differently. I could’ve done a lot of things differently, but I didn’t. I’m not going to go into detail about Pastor Monroe’s role in our affair, because I’m not responsible for him; I’m responsible for me. I will say that I had no idea that the video that was leaked even existed before all of this came out, and the fact that it was recorded without my knowledge or consent makes me even more disgusted with that relationship. I’ve repented to God, and I want to say that I’m sorry to Lady Monroe for being with her husband. My focus now is on figuring out how I can move forward and still be a useful vessel for God, because I know that even in spite of everything that I’ve done, he can still use me. I hope that you’ll keep me in your prayers. So, until next time, remember: Keep it real with yourself, get right with God and figure out the rest as you go!”

Amara took a deep breath before looking at Toni and Shanice after the recording was over.

“How was that?”

“You did amazing, sweetie,” Shanice replied, with a reassuring smile.

“Yeah. That was great, but we’ve got a lot more work to do,” Toni said. “And you can’t hide out here forever. We need to head back to Atlanta ASAP.”

“I understand, but before I leave, there are some things that I need to take care of.”

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"We don't have time to talk to you right now. Mama has to go work at the front desk, since someone's going to be late for their shift, and I have to go run a few errands, which is what you're supposed to be doing, instead of having a little virtual press conference in your room."

Amara took a deep breath before responding. She knew when she'd walked in the office that Kelly would have an attitude, but she was determined to stay focused. She was here to fix her relationships with her aunt and cousin, regardless of how sharp Kelly's tongue could be.

"This won't take long. I promise."

"Ok. Well, I'll just text Sherri and tell her to stop doing inventory for now and work the desk until I can get down there. Kelly, those errands can wait. Let's sit down."

"You're always making adjustments for her," Kelly muttered as she pulled up a chair near Aunt Serena's desk.

"I just wanted to tell you both that I'm sorry for everything that I put you through. Aunt Serena, I'm sorry that I cut class in high school, that I didn't talk to you before I dropped out of college and that I haven't appreciated you the way that I should've. So, I wanted to tell you that I want to work on doing better in my relationships with you and Kelly, and...I wanted to give you this check to pay you back for the two years of tuition that you spent on me."

"Baby, keep your money," Aunt Serena insisted, pushing Amara's hand away.

Kelly snatched the check from Amara's hands.

"Kelly, you give that back to her!"

"No, auntie, I want you to have it. Think of it as an investment. You can use it to expand your business or something. Please take it. You deserve it," Amara insisted.

“Well...I guess it could go towards expanding the business,” Aunt Serena said, taking the check from Kelly.

“And Kelly, I’m really sorry for making things hard for you. I know how frustrating it’s been for you to do everything right--make straight A’s in high school, graduate from college early, with honors, and help Aunt Serena run the business--just to have her invest so much time and energy in me and not even not get anything in return. I know we’ll probably never be best friends or whatever, but I want us to work on being on better terms.”

Even though Kelly’s arms were folded tightly over her chest, Amara did notice that her expression softened a little.

“Well, I guess I accept your apology,” Kelly said. “I don’t know if we’ll ever be completely cool, but...this is a start. And I’m sorry for what I said about you and Uncle Sutton. He accepted you as his daughter, so you are family, and... I guess I can work on doing a better job of treating you like you are.”

“Thank you.”

“Oh, thank the Lord! I’ve been praying for restoration in my family, and God has answered! Y’all bring it in for a hug!” Aunt Serena exclaimed, as she forced them into a group hug.

“Well, I have to go,” Amara said, once the embrace was over. “Thanks for letting me stay here, but it’s time for me to head back home and finish doing some damage control. I’m going to visit more often, though. If I have any friends left after all of this, maybe I can bring them to Eden Springs for a little girls trip.”

“Oh, I can’t wait!” Aunt Serena said.

“Yeah, I guess that sounds fine,” Kelly interjected, “But um...the next time you stay here, you and your friends plan on actually paying, right?”

“Amara, wait up!”

Amara turned around to see Josiah coming toward her with something wrapped in aluminum foil.

“I figured that you might need something to snack on during your trip back, so I brought you some homemade cinnamon rolls.”

“Thanks. Um...do you do this for all of the departing guests?” Amara asked, raising an eyebrow.

Josiah smirked.

“Just the ones who leave an impression.”

“I see. Well, thank you, for this and for listening to and praying for me. I came here trying to run from my problems, but you helped me to face them.”

“Anytime.”

An awkward silence followed.

“Well...I plan on coming to Eden Springs a little bit more, so I guess I’ll see you around.”

“Yeah. Well, I have a few contacts and possible opportunities in Atlanta, so maybe I can hit you up when I’m in town.”

“I’d like that.”

“See you around, Amara. Take care of yourself.”

As Amara drove back to Atlanta that afternoon with Toni and Shanice trailing her, she started to feel fear and anxiety creep back in. Lady Monroe’s threat to blackball her still loomed over her future, and she had a feeling that it wasn’t a coincidence that her publishing and podcast deals fell through shortly after Lady Monroe’s departure.

Amara had no doubt that Lady Monroe had already made some calls to ensure that she was permanently prevented from being invited to speak at certain conferences, churches, etc.

She remembered what Josiah said about how God can use circumstances that people think will destroy them to push them closer to their destinies.

“God, I don’t know how I’m going to overcome all of this, but I thank you that I will, and I thank you for whatever is being developed in me through having my past mistakes exposed. I thank you that even though I went from having a reputation that was sanctified to having a reputation that’s a little scandalous, you still love me and can still use me, and I pray that you help me to figure out what to do next. I also pray for healing for everyone that I’ve hurt. In Jesus’ name I Pray, Amen.”

Amara decided to turn on the radio to further calm her nerves.

I know my rear view can't compare to

What God will do with my life

And I am forgetting what's behind me

I have finally decided

I'll be

Movin' on

I'm movin' on

I'm movin' on...

As Amara listened to Jonathan McReynolds' and Mali Music's song, she tried to focus on moving forward. One of her deepest, darkest secrets had been revealed, and the backlash from that revelation probably wasn't going to die down anytime soon. Even when it did die down, there would always be certain people who associated her with this scandal, and there would always be certain people who wouldn't be able to get past what she'd done, even though it had happened several years back.

Still, she was determined to not let this define her. The Bible was full of people who'd done shameful things and were still loved and used by God. Jonah ran from God. Jacob was a cheater. Moses was a murderer. Amara Holt had a one-year affair with a prominent pastor, but she wasn't going to let the shame that she felt for doing that permanently prevent her from operating in her calling to use her creativity with media and writing to connect people with Christ.

As she drove back home to face the unknown, she could hear her late father's voice declaring: "I may not know what tomorrow holds, but I'm glad that I know who holds tomorrow. So, I don't worry, because I know that as long as I take care of God's business, he'll sho'nuff take care of mine!"